

Fantasies of Oswald's Soviet connection

Legend — the secret world of Lee Harvey Oswald by Edward Jay Epstein (Hutchinson, £5.50)

OF ALL the vast literature on the Kennedy assassination, this book has been presented by its publisher and author as a definitive account. Certainly Edward J. Epstein seems to have had greater resources at his disposal than any other inquiry except the Warren Commission itself. He had a million of years, courtesy of Readers' Digest.

Now whatever Readers' Digest is famous for, it certainly isn't inquiring journalism. So unsurprising by this book points to conclusions that many Digest readers will find immensely satisfying — namely that Oswald was a Soviet agent who got out of control.

Oswald, implies Epstein, was acting alone. And as to why none of this came out at the time, Epstein says that the CIA and FBI covered up Oswald's undoubted Soviet connections in order to hide their incompetence in failing to keep tabs on him at the time of the assassination.

Undoubtedly there is a lot of new and exciting material in this book. Epstein meticulously reconstructs Oswald's life from the time he entered the marines at the age of 17 until shortly before he killed the President — if indeed that is what he did — on November 22, 1963. The picture that emerges is of an Oswald who was far from being the

"lone nut" he was painted as at the time.

From the autumn of 1957 until November 1958 Oswald was a marine radar operator based in Japan where his work gave him access to the (then) top secret spy plane, the U-2. In October 1959 Oswald defected to the Soviet Union and renounced his American citizenship. He was one of only a handful of Americans ever to defect, and his case was a minor sensation, reported at the time in the American press and comprehensively on the files of America's intelligence agencies.

Without offering direct evidence Epstein implies that Oswald had been spying from the time he had been based in Japan and that information he supplied to the Russians led to the shooting down of the U-2 just before the big power summit conference in 1961.

After two years in the Soviet Union, apparently working in a factory near Minsk, Oswald announced he was disillusioned with the Soviet system and was allowed to return to America with his Russian bride of a few months, Marina. At least as surprising as the fact that he was allowed out of the Soviet Union is the fact that he was allowed to resettle in America without more than cursory questioning by the US intelligence agencies.

Back in America Oswald appears to have established links with a bewildering range of individuals and pressure groups — White Russians, pro-Castro Cubans, anti-Castro

Cubans. He subscribed to Marxist publications and even purchased a rifle with which, we are told, he took some pot shots at an extreme Right-wing general.

During all this time, too, he appears to have attracted almost no attention from the ubiquitous American intelligence services, though they seem to have been monitoring or bugging just about every organization or magazine with which Oswald was associated.

As evidence for the assertion that Oswald remained a Soviet agent during this period, Epstein offers one George De Mohrenschildt, a wealthy East European emigré. De Mohrenschildt committed suicide while Epstein was interviewing him, so there can be no question that he had something to hide. Epstein shows that De Mohrenschildt appears to have been a Nazi agent during the war and that he was actually in Guatemala during part of the period when the CIA was training an army of exile Cubans for the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba.

Nevertheless, Epstein invites us to believe that, by the time he met Oswald, De Mohrenschildt was a Soviet agent whose job it was to supervise Oswald on behalf of his Russian masters. Around this point an air of utter fantasy begins to overtake what was till then a fascinating inquiry.

Among the fundamental questions which this book raises, but does not attempt to answer, is why, on his

return from the Soviet Union, was Oswald not immediately arrested and charged with spying? It was only a few years since the Rosenbergs were electrocuted for doing as much as Oswald is alleged to have done. Could it be perhaps that the CIA did a deal with Oswald — the terms of which were that he should go and infiltrate some Left-wing groups, like the Fair Play For Cuba Committee, in return for immunity from prosecution? This would explain his contacts with pro and anti Castro groups. It would also explain more convincingly than Epstein does why the CIA were so anxious to cover up Oswald's background.

Secondly, if Oswald was involved in killing Kennedy — and the evidence suggests that he was — who else was involved with him? Epstein does not address this question. He might, for example, have used some of his million dollars from Readers' Digest to probe the background of Jack Ruby, Oswald's assassin. Astonishingly, Ruby merits only three references in the whole of this book.

Epstein does not find worthy of comment the evidence that Ruby knew Oswald before the assassination; that he ran casinos in Havana before Castro took over and that he was connected with both Cuban exiles and the Mafia.

A good try, Mr. Epstein, but you raise as many questions as you answer.

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