

LEGEND: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald, by Edward Jay Epstein. Reader's Digest Press/McGraw-Hill, 382 pp., \$12.95.

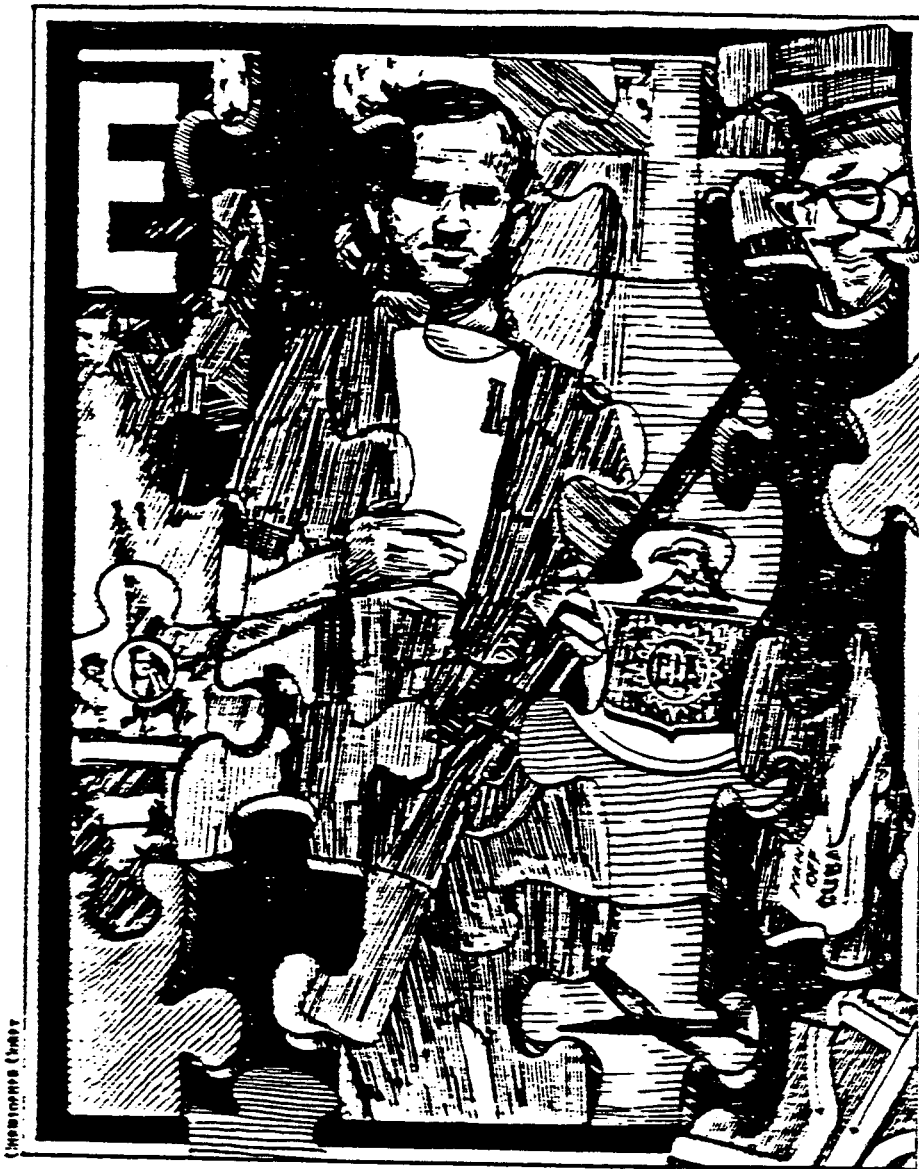
A legendary Oswald

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DESPITE ITS FAILURE AS A biography of Lee Harvey Oswald, *Legend* is an intriguing book. It suggests that much of Oswald's visible career following his defection in 1959 to the Soviet Union was the enactment of a "legend"—a false biography, a cover story concocted for Oswald by the KGB after he fell under their control before or during his defection. A stronger thesis is implied: although Epstein coyly says that neither he nor his CIA sources is accusing the KGB of having plotted the assassination, the chapter entitled "Day of the Assassin" (on Oswald) is part of a section called "The Mission."

Epstein assumes that Oswald was guilty as charged in the Kennedy assassination, but he is inexplicably indifferent about whether Oswald acted alone. He devotes only a six-page appendix to the status of the evidence. In it, he omits and distorts controversies, misconstrues expert opinion, casually speculates in areas where facts are available, and avoids any evidence of Oswald's innocence.

Epstein sheds some new light on Oswald's life with the marines in Japan, and in Russia, but the hypothesis that Oswald was a KGB agent remains unproven. Epstein never attempts to



explain why an undercover KGB agent—especially one on so sensitive a “mission”—would engage in conspicuous leftwing activities, including a radio debate in defense of Castro’s Cuba. A major exhibit in Epstein’s case is an entry in Oswald’s Russian diary. The entry refers to the subsequent promotion of a U.S. embassy officer, and there is no attempt to conceal the fact that it was written *after* that promotion. Epstein presents this entry as an “anachronism” (without quoting or citing it), implying that he has discovered a subtle flaw in Oswald’s KGB-prepared “legend.” In fact, even the Warren Report noted that the diary was not a contemporaneous record. *Legend’s* ultimate failure as biography, however, is the absence of any rigorous analysis of how Oswald’s alleged cover story might relate to the events of November 22, 1963, which gave his name its place in history.

Legend is an allegory: the story of Os-

wald is a popular mystery, but here his tale is told in order to introduce the reader to a deeper, and less popular belief—that U.S. intelligence has been penetrated at a high level by the KGB. The main source of the story is James Jesus Angleton, once the chief of the CIA’s Counterintelligence staff. According to Angleton, the KGB sent a fake defector to the United States to cover up its covert links to Oswald. The ostensible proof of the penetration is that the fake defector—one Yuri Ivanovich Nosenko—is now drawing \$30,000 a year as a CIA consultant, while Angleton, who challenged his *bona fides*, is out in the cold—forced to resign in a purge that turned the agency (in Epstein’s words) “inside out.”

The gospel according to Angleton—and passed on uncritically by Epstein—begins with the appearance of a prophet in the form of a Soviet defector, Anatoli M. Golitsin. Golitsin reveals that there is a “mole” in the CIA—that

the agency has been penetrated up to its highest echelons by the KGB. Characteristically, Epstein never considers the possibility that Golitsin might have himself been a disinformation agent, sent by the KGB to feed paranoia to the CIA by persuading the agency that one of its top officers was as red as Kim Philby. In fact, the disruption ultimately produced by the belief in this penetration appears to have been immense.

Six months after Golitsin’s defection, another KGB agent—Yuri Nosenko—made his first contact with the CIA. In January 1964, Nosenko also defected to the American side. His story turned attention away from some of Golitsin’s leads to the mole. Nosenko named many names, but, according to Angleton, he may only have been “burning” agents who were no longer of any use to the KGB.

The main message from Nosenko, however, was that he had personally supervised the KGB’s file on Lee Harvey Oswald when the latter defected to the Soviet Union in 1959, and that Oswald had never worked for Soviet intelligence. According to Nosenko, the KGB had beaten even the FBI to the conclusion that Oswald was a lone nut—an abnormal, unstable personality, unworthy of KGB recruitment. Despite Oswald’s declaration at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow that he had agreed to furnish the Soviets with information he had acquired as a radar operator in the Marine Corps (stationed at a major operational base of the U-2 spy plane), Nosenko claimed that the KGB hadn’t even bothered to debrief Oswald.

The CIA’s Counterintelligence and Soviet divisions both quickly came to doubt Nosenko’s story. Equally quickly, the FBI appears to have embraced it. Key aspects of Nosenko’s account were corroborated by a favorite FBI source code-named “Fedora,” a KGB double agent working under diplomatic cover at the United Nations. In the long run, those who doubted Nosenko had to conclude that Fedora was—and maybe is—a triple agent.

FOR THE MOST PART, EPSTEIN relates Angleton’s story uncritically. He does not, for example, consider more plausible hypotheses consistent with the known facts about Oswald’s life. Most glaringly, Epstein shows no sign of having seriously investigated the possibility that Oswald’s defection to the Soviet Union might have been a U.S. intelligence assignment. Despite Epstein’s

first sentence—"This book is about Lee Harvey Oswald and his relations with the intelligence services of three nations"—the asymmetry of his analysis is striking. When Oswald contacts a Soviet consular official with secret ties to the KGB, it suggests his covert links to the Soviets. But when he contacts a U.S. consular official with secret ties to the CIA, it suggests nothing. The KGB's claim that it did not debrief Oswald when he defected is (understandably) disbelieved, and becomes evidence that Oswald was really under KGB control. The CIA's failure to debrief Oswald when he redefected from Russia is, according to Epstein, merely an "inexplicable lapse."

Lapses by U.S. intelligence in the Oswald and assassination investigations were legion, but Epstein's discussion of J. Edgar Hoover's flaws, crucial to his thesis, seems speculative and distorted. There is no doubt that the FBI

exquisitely painstaking sifting-out of what is false.

It is hard to believe that this is the same James Angleton who now chairs the Security and Intelligence Fund, which raises money to defend ex-government agents prosecuted for black-bag jobs and other crimes in the line of duty. A 1977 fund-raising letter signed by Angleton credited the Communist Party, working through a civil liberties front organization, with achieving nearly all its goals of undermining U.S. counterintelligence capabilities. The House Un-American Activities Committee, he complains, has been destroyed, and only the FBI and CIA remain—with both, according to Angleton, "so badly shattered that they no longer have adequate internal security or counterintelligence capabilities."

In his previous book, *Agency of Fear*, (on the Drug Enforcement Administra-

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE disclosures Epstein has gathered from Angleton and other disaffected ex-CIA personnel is that there is now a window where we used to have only an opaque barrier. The book intends to let us look through the window in one direction, to see how Oswald looked from Angleton's side of the glass. But we can also look through the window the other way, to see how Angleton and Company treated the Oswald case, and to begin to understand how they viewed other CIA secrets.

This insight raises many new questions. Most provocatively, if Angleton now believes that Oswald was a KGB agent, what did he think from 1959 to 1962, when his section of the CIA was intercepting Oswald's mail? Epstein reports that Angleton's people obtained a strongly anti-American letter which Oswald wrote to his brother shortly after defecting. Epstein has claimed elsewhere that a letter in which Oswald said he had seen U-2 pilot Gary Powers was also intercepted. In 1962, says Epstein, "another piece of the jigsaw puzzle for James Angleton and his subordinates" was a letter that Marina Oswald apparently received from the daughter of a suspected KGB agent in Leningrad. These facts are new; this mail interception was apparently never disclosed to the FBI or the Warren Commission. In fact, the CIA told a congressional committee in 1976 that the only intercepted Oswald correspondence was an innocuous letter to him. Thus, Angleton's staff may have suppressed their preassassination knowledge of Oswald, even from the rest of the CIA.

Epstein's Angleton reveals an important version of a secret struggle inside the CIA. The Nosenko battle is a protracted, perhaps decisive, part of a larger war. That struggle concerns the role of counterintelligence and the wisdom of disclosing agency secrets to Congress and the press. Other issues of policy—ranging from the Middle East to the Sino-Soviet dispute—have also been affected.

Although the 904-page report of the CIA's Soviet division concluded that Nosenko was a disinformation agent, by October 1968, he had been released and rehabilitated. Key Angleton people in the Soviet division were reassigned, and, for Angleton, the Nosenko case was turned "inside out." Only Counterintelligence dissented in the final round-table review, and Angleton even suspected that Nosenko was main-

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did cover up its deficiencies in the handling of Oswald, and that Hoover controlled the assassination investigation like a petty tyrant. But Epstein has made him into a convenient whipping boy, someone more concerned with the FBI's image than Oswald's possible connections to the KGB.

The contrast between Hoover, whose thinking Epstein characterizes as "brutally simple," and Angleton, who is depicted as wise and subtle, is stunning. Although Epstein does not make clear just how much he relies on or agrees with Angleton, his warm sympathy for the counterintelligence curmudgeon is un concealed. Angleton is portrayed as a man of crafty intelligence and civilized avocations, with the patience natural to one who is a trout fisherman and a Nero Wolfe-like breeder of orchids. (Epstein has even adopted the latter hobby.) The professorial Angleton studied the Nosenko file "through his thick horn-rimmed glasses," we are told; he is a sage who finds truth by the

tion). Epstein noted that, "Because the circumstances surrounding each interview bear directly on [its] credibility . . . I have decided to reveal all the sources for this book and comment on the motives, problems, contradictions, and gaps that I found. . . ." Such an approach is conspicuously absent from *Legend*, and Epstein should not be excused for his recurring ambiguity about sources. It is impossible to determine which parts were provided or suggested by private CIA sources. Epstein repeatedly omits specific citations to published material, and erroneously gives the impression that he forced the release of many assassination documents. This often careless or devious treatment of material from published sources must call into question the accuracy of Epstein's reports on his many private interviews. There may well be information in his interviews of Oswald's fellow marines which Epstein did not choose to discuss or whose significance he did not discern.

taining contact with some Soviet-controlled source, possibly the top-level KGB "mole" in the CIA. In December 1974 an old adversary, William Colby, forced Angleton to resign by leaking to Seymour Hersh details of the illegal mail coverage under Angleton's direction.

Epstein does not mention Angleton's memorable and cryptic retort to Hersh's questions about CIA wrongdoings and domestic activities: "A mansion has many rooms and there were many things going on during the period

of the [antiwar] bombings. I'm not privy to who struck John." "Who struck John" is apparently CIA jargon meaning "the details." The origin of the phrase is unknown, but the curious coincidence that the expression literally conveys the continuing mystery of the Kennedy assassination is a neat piece of irony. □

According to Epstein, the one thing Angleton doesn't believe in is coincidence.

[Original last line]

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