

CIA Opens Pre-Dallas File on Oswald

Mexico City Trip Noted but Little New Offered on JFK Assassination

5/14/92
By George Lardner Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writer

The file on Lee Harvey Oswald that the CIA had collected before the assassination of President John F. Kennedy was made public yesterday, but it offered slim pickings for longtime students of the case.

It also served as a reminder that the file would have been thicker if other CIA documents pertaining to Oswald from that period had not been apparently destroyed in what the agency once described as a matter of routine housekeeping.

Oswald, a former Marine who defected to the Soviet Union in 1959, was arrested in Dallas shortly after the assassination and was charged with the president's murder early the next morning. In a finding that has been hotly disputed over the years, the Warren Commission concluded that he killed the president, acting alone.

The 34 documents released yesterday dealt with Oswald's defection to Moscow and his activities following his return to the United States in 1962. Most of the records came from other agencies, such as the FBI and the State Department, and almost all of them had been made public before. Only 12 documents, including four of newspaper clippings, originated at the CIA.

"It all looks familiar," said James H. Lesar, a Washington attorney who heads the nonprofit Assassination Archives and Research Center here. "I suppose without checking page by page, I can't say there's nothing new, but a preliminary review doesn't seem to show anything."

The CIA opened a personality file—known as a 201 file—on Oswald on Dec. 9, 1960. That record, which consisted initially of a single page and was listed under the name "Lee Henry Oswald," noted he had "defected to the USSR in October 1959."

The 14-month delay between Oswald's defection and the opening of the file has never been satisfactorily explained. The House Select Committee on Assassinations, which looked into that issue in the late 1970s, pointed out that the CIA had been alerted to the defection by a State Department cable dated Oct. 31, 1959.

"At least three other communications of a confidential nature that gave more detail on the Oswald case were sent to the CIA in the same period," the committee said in its final report. Moreover, CIA officials told the committee that the substance of the Oct. 31, 1959, cable was sufficient to warrant the opening of a 201 file.

That, in turn, raised the question of where the cable and other messages pertaining to Oswald had been sent and stored at the CIA prior to the opening of the 201 file. The CIA told the committee there was no way of tracing the paths these documents took, explaining "because document dissemination records of relatively low national security significance are retained for only a 5-year period, they were no longer in existence for the years 1959-63."

Seven of the 12 CIA documents released yesterday were made public before as part of the files of the Warren Commission. Most of the

new records dealt with an old subject: Oswald's trip to Mexico City in the fall of 1963.

The CIA station there told headquarters in an Oct. 9, 1963, cable that an American male speaking broken Russian, who "said his name was Lee Oswald," visited the Soviet embassy on Sept. 28 and spoke with Valeriy V. Kostikov, who was subsequently identified as a member of the KGB's "wet affairs," or assassinations, section. The cable also said the CIA station in Mexico City had photos, presumably taken in routine surveillance of the Soviet Embassy, of a 6-foot-tall man around 35 years old with athletic build and a receding hairline and suggested the photos were of Oswald.

One of the photos—subsequent Freedom of Information Act litigation showed there were 16 of them, according to Lesar—was made public by the Warren Commission. It was not of Oswald, and no one has ever figured out who was pictured in it. The discrepancy stirred still unresolved debate over whether the photo was of a man who did speak with Kostikov and pretended to be Oswald or whether Oswald himself visited the embassy but the CIA mistook a photo of someone else as his picture.

The CIA provided the partially censored records to the National Archives, which made them public. But officials at the Archives were apparently chagrined at the agency's failure to give them the unpurgated originals.

Staff researcher Robert Thomason contributed to this report.