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NATION

Soviet JFK Files a 'Breakthrough'

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Eighty long-secret Soviet spy files on John F. Kennedy's assassination — unexpectedly turned over by Russia's Boris Yeltsin to President Bill Clinton — were described yesterday by an American expert as a "monumental breakthrough" in the controversy over the murder.

The files chiefly concerned Lee Harvey Oswald, Kennedy's accused assassin, who defected to the Soviet Union in 1959 and remained there until returning to the United States in 1962, the year before the murder.

There was no immediate word on the documents' contents.

But Kermit Hall, a historian who served as a member of the federal board that reviewed and released documents dealing with the assassination, said the Russian gift of the documents was highly significant. The documents could show what Oswald was think-

ing and doing in the period before the assassination, Hall said. "This could tell us if he was scheming to do anything," Hall said.

Lem Johns, who was a Secret Service agent protecting the Kennedy motorcade and later became assistant director for protective operations, agreed that the files could be revealing. He recalled published pictures showing Oswald holding up signs protesting U.S. policies on Cuba. "If the Russians had all these files on Oswald, they may show he was more than just an activist holding up signs," Johns said. Yeltsin, the Russian president, surprised Clinton Sunday by presenting him with the documents at a summit meeting on Kosovo in Cologne, Germany. The papers will now be translated and eventually be turned over to the National Archives, where Kennedy assassination documents are kept.

assassination documents when the term of the Assassination Records Review Board, on which Hall served, expired in September. The board had requested the files from the Russians in 1996, without success. It has long been reported that the KGB, the Soviet intelligence agency, suspected Oswald might have been an American spy when he defected to Moscow. The KGB is said to have bugged his apartment when he moved to Minsk, where he worked in a radio factory and met his future wife, Marina. KGB agents reportedly maintained constant surveillance over Oswald and paid neighbors to inform on him. In the end, Oswald supposedly became disillusioned with life in the Soviet Union and moved to Dallas.

Some conspiracy theorists contend Oswald was actually functioning as a Soviet agent in assassinating Kennedy. But Gus Russo, who has written a book and worked on a television documentary about the case, said he has seen some of the Russian documents and they contain "zero evidence that Oswald was a spy."