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LEGEND

The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald.
By Edward Jay Epstein.
Illustrated: 384 pp. New York:
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By KEVIN BUCKLEY

IN January 1964, when all kinds of rumors about the real story behind the assassination of President Kennedy were first beginning to be heard, a high-ranking Soviet K.G.B. officer named Yuri Nosenko approached the C.I.A. in Geneva with some startling news. He had, he said, personally supervised the entire K.G.B. file on Lee Harvey Oswald and therefore knew everything there was to know about the alleged assassin's relationship with Soviet intelligence. He wanted to defect and he wanted to talk. The C.I.A. promptly brought him to the United States, where he has been ever since. Now, under a new name, Nosenko lives a life of affluence and influence in North Carolina, courtesy of the C.I.A. The agency bought him a house, found him a job and pays him an annual allowance of \$30,000. In return, he keeps his mouth shut. He also acts as a consultant for the agency and the F.B.I. in counter-intelligence matters relating to the Soviet Union. Some current but mostly former members of the C.I.A. consider this state of affairs a "travesty" and "tragic." But, as Edward Jay Epstein tells it in this fascinating, alarming and perhaps enormously significant book, Nosenko has been a source of profound controversy within the Government for a long time.

From the middle of 1964 until 1967 the C.I.A. quartered Nosenko in different circumstances than he now enjoys. He was kept in a single, padded room with nothing more than a chair, a bed and a washbasin. He was subjected to relentless interrogation in an effort to learn if anything he had been saying was the truth. His defenders were struck by the fact that some of his information answered questions which other Soviet sources had raised. For example, an agent code-named "Stone" had told American intelligence that there was a "mole," or penetration agent, of the K.G.B. working in the American system. This news raised the specter of a Kim Philby-style betrayal of American intelligence. Nosenko identified the "mole," and there was relief in some quarters that the culprit was a low-level, relatively harmless figure.

J. Edgar Hoover championed Nosenko's credibility and blunted the questions of those who doubted him. For one thing, everything Nosenko said corroborated

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and was corroborated by what yet another Soviet agent, this one code-named "Fedora," had been saying. Fedora was Hoover's favorite agent and the source of some of Hoover's most important counter-espionage investigations over the years. In 1964 Fedora was a triumph for Hoover in the same degree that, for example, his bureau's handling of Lee Harvey Oswald before the assassination of President Kennedy had been a failure. Hoover himself had charged his subordinates with "gross incompetence" in the investigation of Oswald after his return from Russia. (Oswald had defected to Russia in October 1959 and redefected in June 1962.) Hoover was pleased when Oswald was depicted as an unstable individual acting alone. If Nosenko was supported by Fedora, Hoover was ready, indeed eager, to declare him a genuine defector.

Others in the intelligence community at first suspected and eventually firmly believed the opposite. One of them was James Jesus Angleton, the former head of C.I.A. counterintelligence and one of the diminishing, perhaps now vanished breed of C.I.A.

men who would not be too far out of place in John le Carré's "Circus." It does not take a George Smiley, le Carré's master spy, to see that Angleton was a principal source for Edward Jay Epstein in piecing together this whole story. Indeed, Angleton made an art of patient planning and reconstruction. He liked to practice "elicitation" with defectors. He was perhaps somewhat paranoid but also very intelligent. More than anything, he was interested in measuring whatever he had "elicited" from an agent against all the other available information and then forming broad patterns. To compress Epstein's meticulously arranged narrative, Angleton and others began to believe that Nosenko was a liar. They came to believe that rather than being a genuine defector, he was in fact a "disinformation" agent sent by the K.G.B. to mislead the American Government. Moreover, by assembling information from many sources, they came to believe that Nosenko was just one piece in a broader disinformation strategy in which his falsehoods were designed to dovetail with the falsehoods of other Soviet agents.

Then — and now, as Epstein suggests — it was imperative to resolve the conflict of interpretation of Nosenko. In 1967, when Richard Helms was director of the C.I.A., a curious process began, as Epstein tells it. Nosenko was released from "hostile interrogation." Fresh faces from the C.I.A. and the F.B.I. were assigned to the case, and they began knocking holes in a report that had already knocked holes in Nosenko's story. Gradually, in what one counterintelligence officer told Epstein was "the great purge of the Slavs," all the doubters were reassigned and, in a new report, all the doubts were suppressed. This process, according to Epstein, reached a climax in December 1974, when Seymour Hersh, an investigative reporter for The New York Times, was about to reveal the details of the C.I.A.'s domestic espionage campaign. According to Epstein, C.I.A. director William Colby "directed Hersh's attention to the C.I.A.'s program of opening mail from the Soviet Union, which he admitted was illegal and which had been supervised by Angleton." Moments after Hersh left his office, Colby called in Angleton and his chief assistants, told them they were about to be exposed in The New York Times and quickly obtained their resignations. "With Nosenko accredited and the counterintelligence staff purged, the C.I.A. had truly been turned inside out," Epstein writes.

By itself, this account of the handling of one defector would be a fascinating and troubling story. But it takes on explosive qualities when one considers what Nosenko had to say about Oswald. His message was clear. When Oswald defected to Russia in 1959 "it was decided that [he] was of no interest whatsoever, so the K.G.B. recommended that he go home to the United States," Nosenko told the C.I.A. in Epstein's account. "No matter how I may hate anyone [in the K.G.B.], I cannot speak against my convictions," Nosenko went on. "And since I know this case, I can unhesitatingly sign off to the fact that the Soviet Union cannot be tied into this in any way." For a great many reasons certain C.I.A. officers believed he was lying. Epstein summarizes their conclusions: "Nosenko was a Soviet intelligence agent dispatched by the K.G.B. expressly for the purpose of delivering disinformation to the C.I.A., F.B.I. and Warren Commission."

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As the counterintelligence experts explored Nosenko's story, they realized that "it coincided closely with the version Oswald gave in what purported to be a diary found among his effects." In intelligence circles, a "legend" is "a false biography," to use Nosenko's own succinct definition. Epstein quotes a top-secret staff report to the Warren Commission to pose his central question: "... if Oswald was an agent of the Soviet Union and they together made up the 'legend' about these events, we have no way of independently checking the truth of the 'legend.' The question therefore arises, how are we to assess whether or not what we know of Oswald's 'real life' is not just a 'legend' designed by the K.G.B. and consistently lived out by Oswald thereafter?"

Epstein's book does not answer this question, at least not conclusively; instead, it poses it over and over again, while raising even more questions. The ultimate question, of course, is whether or not Oswald was acting under Soviet direction when he shot and killed President Kennedy. Epstein seems to dispose of this possibility very quickly: "Neither Angleton's shop nor the Soviet-Russia division believed that Oswald was acting under the control of Soviet intelligence when he assassinated the President. (In fact, circumstantial evidence seemed to diminish the possibility)" he writes. "It seemed far more likely to both that the relationship Nosenko was attempting to protect might be a prior connection Oswald had had with the K.G.B." (Epstein merely records the fact that it was Jack

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Ruby who later killed Oswald.)

Epstein has made a career out of moving through vast documentation and tricky, ambiguous material. He is hardly a stranger to the assassination controversy. His first book, "Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth" (1966), though controversial at the time, was one of the first to portray the inadequacies of that investigation no matter what broad truth it might have established. "Agency of Fear" shed considerable light on the Nixon Administration's manipulation of law-enforcement agencies. For "Legend" Epstein had the backing of the Reader's Digest, access to more than 10,000 pages of previously classified material, and interviews with more than 400 men and women. God only knows how many "facts," each carrying an itching implication, his research turned up. His dry, meticulous style is a sometimes maddening blend of caution and sensationalism. His narrative is always pregnant with possibilities and implications. His arrangements of certain facts often seem to suggest frightening conclusions. But Epstein refuses to state them. Is he a tease? Or has he simply provided a stout defense to any charges that he has gone off half-cocked? The answer must be as ambiguous as much of the material.

One of his interview subjects was George De Mohrenschildt, a mystery man perhaps linked at various times with four different intelligence services. For reasons unknown, the debonair, worldly De Mohrenschildt took up the pathetic Oswalds and tried to organize their lives in Dallas in the months before the assassination. It never becomes clear what his purpose was. But the chapter on him is titled "The Handler." And, a year ago, during a lunch-break in an interview session with Epstein, De Mohrenschildt turned up: dead.

from a gunshot wound, an apparent suicide. "His death has left a gap in Oswald's secret world that will probably never be completely filled in," writes Epstein.

Epstein's portrayal of Oswald's "secret world" (or is it his "legend"?) is tantalizing. One of the most intriguing sections deals with the amazing possibility that Oswald might have had a hand in bringing down Francis Gary Powers and the U-2 he was piloting in May 1960. Oswald surely was a Marine Corps radar specialist at, among other places, Atsugi, Japan. Atsugi was a U-2 base, and it is certainly plausible that Oswald was able to provide the Russians with information that enabled them to track the high-flying spy plane and bring it down.

Once in Russia, according to Epstein, Oswald tried to commit suicide. This attempt was one of the factors, in Nosenko's version of things, that made the Russians believe Oswald was unstable. Yet afterward Oswald was allowed to live an exceedingly comfortable life, especially by Russian standards, in Minsk. He had a large apartment, an active social life and was even allowed to own a shotgun. There are mysteries everywhere. Oswald was surely in contact with Cuban intelligence operatives in Mexico a few weeks before the assassination. And this was at a time when the Cubans apparently had some information about the C.I.A.'s own plans to assassinate Fidel Castro. And who, for that matter, was the lovely Eurasian woman, who perhaps spoke Russian, with whom Oswald was seen in Japan while he was still in the Marines?

At the very least, this book demands very serious attention. It may be, however, that it will take all the patience and resources of a George Smiley to plumb the mysteries Epstein has presented. ■