

# Who Was Lee Harvey Oswald?

By EDWARD JAY EPSTEIN

The endless tangle of questions about bullets, trajectories, wounds, time sequences and inconsistent testimony that has surrounded the assassination of President John F. Kennedy for 20 years—and obsessively fascinated, if not entirely blinded, a generation of assassination buffs—probably never will be resolved. Within this morass of facts, however, there is a central actor: Lee Harvey Oswald. His rifle, which fired the fatal bullet into the president, was found in the sniper's nest. His cartridge cases were also found a few feet away from the body of a murdered policeman on the route of his flight. He was captured shortly thereafter, resisting arrest, with the loaded murder revolver in his hand.

In light of this overwhelming evidence, the issue that ought to have concerned Americans was not Oswald's technical guilt, but his dangerous liaisons abroad. Only eight weeks before the assassination, he had excited FBI and CIA interest in his activities by renewing his contacts with Cuban and Soviet KGB officials in Mexico City. However, although these foreign connections remained of great concern to the two U.S. intelligence agencies, they were considered far too sensitive to be aired publicly in the emotional aftermath of the president's slaying.

Oswald was not a "loner" in the conventional sense. Ever since handed a pamphlet about the Rosenberg prosecution at 15 years old in New York City, he had sought out affiliations with political organizations, front groups and foreign nations that opposed the policies of the U.S. When he was 16, he wrote the Socialist Party "I am a Marxist and have been studying Socialist Principles for well over fifteen months," and he requested information about joining their "Youth League." He

also attempted to persuade a friend to join the local youth auxiliary of the Communist Party. He subsequently made membership inquiries to such organizations as the Socialist Workers Party, the Socialist Labor Party, the Gus Hall-Benjamin Davis Defense Committee, the Daily Worker, the Fair Play for Cuba Committee and the Communist Party, U.S.A.—correspondence that eventually brought him under surveillance by the FBI.

## Compromised U.S. Security

While still in the early stages of his flirtation with political causes, Oswald joined the Marine Corps—primarily to get away from home. In October 1959, after a two-year stint as a radar operator, Oswald ended any lingering doubts about his loyalty by becoming the first Marine to defect to the Soviet Union. In Moscow, he delivered a letter stating, "I affirm that my allegiance is to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics."

Not only did he publicly renounce his American citizenship but he told the U.S. consul that he intended to turn over to the Soviet Union all the military secrets that he had acquired while serving in the Marines, adding that he had data of "special interest" to the Russians. Since he indeed had exposure to military secrets, such as the U-2 spy plane and radar identification systems, and since he may have collected data while still on active duty, his defection had serious espionage implications. Oswald thus effectively compromised the security of all he had come in contact with in the Marines. He also, through this act, irrevocably put himself in the hands of his hosts. He was now completely dependent on the Soviets for financial support, legal status and protection.

On May 1, 1960, less than six months after Oswald's defection, a U-2 was shot down over the Soviet Union and its pilot, Francis Gary Powers, was captured. Oswald wrote his brother that he had seen Mr. Powers—a claim that was to greatly

intrigue the pilot after he was returned to the U.S. During his lengthy interrogation in Moscow, Mr. Powers was confronted with a wealth of information about previous flights of his spy plane. Since his interrogators laced each successive question with new details, he became convinced that Soviet intelligence must have had a readily available and knowledgeable source.

Before disappearing into the Soviet hinterland for a year, Oswald spelled out his operational creed in a long letter to his brother. From Moscow, he wrote presently of his willingness to commit murder for a political cause: "I want you to understand what I say now, I do not say lightly, or unknowingly, since I've been in the military. . . . In the event of war I would kill any American who put a uniform on in defense of the American Government—," and then ominously added for emphasis, "Any American." Although his letter was routinely intercepted by the CIA



and microfilmed, no discernable attention was paid to the threat contained in it.

When he returned from the Soviet Union in June 1962 (with a little help from a State Department eager to demonstrate that it could win back a defector from the Soviets), Oswald, now joined by a Russian wife, retained his militant convictions.

In Dallas, where he settled, he purchased a rifle with telescopic sights and a revolver from a mail-order house under a false name. He also lectured his more liberal acquaintances on the need for violent action rather than mere words.

Gen. Edwin A. Walker, an extreme conservative, who had been active in Dallas organizing anti-Castro guerrillas, became in the spring of 1963 a particular focus of Oswald's attention. He repeatedly suggested to a German geologist, Volkmar Schmidt, and other friends, that Gen. Walker should be treated like a "murderer at large." He did not stop at fierce words. For weeks, he methodically stalked Gen. Walker's movements, photographing his residence from several angles.

He then had his wife photograph him, dressed entirely in black, with his revolver strapped in a holster on his hip, his sniper's rifle in his right hand, and two newspapers—the Worker and the Militant—in his left hand. He made three copies of the photograph—one of which he inscribed, dated "5-IV-63" and sent to a Dallas acquaintance, George De Mohrenschildt. He left that same night with his rifle wrapped in a raincoat, telling his wife he was off to "target practice," but his target, Gen. Walker, was out of town. Five nights later, Oswald returned to Gen. Walker's house, and fired a shot at him that missed his head by inches, demonstrating that he had the capacity as well as the willingness to kill "Any American."

When Mr. De Mohrenschildt heard news of the Walker shooting on the radio, he figured that Oswald had probably been the rifleman. The next day, he asked Oswald whether he had taken a "pot shot" at Gen. Walker, but Oswald avoided answering. Mr. De Mohrenschildt had probably seen more of Oswald during this time than anyone else, including his wife, Marina, and

had attempted to piece together what Oswald had been doing in the Soviet Union.

Only hours before he committed suicide in 1977, Mr. De Mohrenschildt explained to me that he had been asked to keep tabs on Oswald by the CIA officer in Dallas responsible for debriefing businessmen on their trips to communist countries. Since Oswald was presumed to be unfriendly, the CIA officer suggested that it would be useful to place a "friend" in Oswald's path. Mr. De Mohrenschildt agreed to talk to Oswald in hopes the CIA man might help him in future ventures. The Walker shooting, however, was more than he had bargained for; he immediately parted company with Oswald.

After the failed assassination, Oswald went to New Orleans, where he became the organizer for the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. Aside from printing leaflets, staging demonstrations, getting arrested and appearing on local radio talk shows in support of Castro that summer, Oswald attempted to personally infiltrate an anti-Castro group that was organizing sabotage raids against Cuba. He explained to friends that they could figure out his "anti-imperialist" policy by "reading between the lines" of the Militant and other such publications.

In August, he wrote the central committee of the Communist Party, USA asking "Whether in your opinion, I can compete with anti-progressive forces above ground, or whether I should always remain in the background, i.e. underground."

During this hot summer, while Oswald spent evenings practicing sighting his rifle in his backyard, the Militant raged on about the Kennedy administration's "terrorist bandit" attacks on Cuba. And as the semi-secret war against Castro escalated, Oswald told his wife he planned to hijack an airliner to Havana, suggesting, as the summer progressed, that he might even earn a position in Castro's government. On Sept. 9, in a report that appeared on the

front page of the New Orleans Times-Picayune, Castro himself warned that if American leaders continued "aiding plans to eliminate Cuban leaders . . . they themselves will not be safe."

The implication of this threat was not lost on Oswald. Telling his wife that they might never meet again, he left New Orleans two weeks later headed for the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City. To convince the Cubans of his bona fides—and seriousness—he had prepared a dossier on himself, which included a 10-page resume, outlining his revolutionary activities, newspaper clippings about his defection to the Soviet Union, propaganda material he had printed, documents he had stolen from a printing company engaged in classified map reproduction for the U.S. Army, his correspondence with the Fair Play for Cuba Committee executives and photographs linking him to the Walker shooting.

Oswald applied for a visa at the Cuban Embassy on the morning of Sept. 27, 1963. He said that he wanted to stop in Havana en route to the Soviet Union. On the application the consular officer who interviewed him, noted: "The applicant states that he is a member of the American Communist Party and Secretary in New Orleans of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee." Despite such recommendations, Oswald was told that he needed a Soviet visa before the Cuban visa could be issued. He argued over this requisite with the Cuban consul, Eusebio Azque, in front of witnesses, and reportedly made wild claims about services he might perform for the Cuban cause.

During the next five days, he traveled back and forth between the Soviet and Cuban embassies attempting to straighten out the difficulty. When he telephoned from the Cuban Embassy to arrange an appointment at the Soviet Embassy with an officer named Valery Vladimirovich Kostikov, he set off alarm bells at the CIA, which had been surreptitiously monitoring the phone line. Mr. Kostikov was a KGB officer who had been under close surveillance in Mexico by the FBI (and who, in 1971, was identified by a KGB defector in London as the head of sabotage operations in

Mr. (no). By the time the CIA had identified Oswald, and notified the FBI, he had left Mexico and returned to Dallas.

That October, Oswald assumed a different identity—"O.H.Lee"—and, separating himself from his family, he moved to a rooming house. He also forbade his wife from divulging his whereabouts. He then got a job at the Texas Book Depository, which overlooked the convergence of the three main streets into central Dallas.

On Oct. 18, Oswald's visa was approved by the Cuban Foreign Ministry (despite the fact that he had not officially received a Soviet visa, as required). Three weeks later, he wrote another letter to the Soviet Embassy, referring to his meeting with Mr. Kostikov in Mexico, and adding cryptically: "Had I been able to reach the Soviet Embassy in Havana as planned, the embassy there would have had time to complete our business."

FBI counterintelligence, which had intercepted this letter in Washington, and evidently was interested in Oswald's "business" in Havana, urgently requested its field agents in Dallas to locate him. An FBI agent, James Hosty, rushed over to the home where Oswald's family was living, and questioned his wife, but he did not find Oswald until Nov. 22, when he had been arrested for the murder of a Dallas policeman and President Kennedy.

#### A Man With a Rifle

In the final analysis, the Warren Commission turned out to be right: Oswald was the assassin. He had brought his rifle to work on Nov. 22, carefully prepared a concealed sniper's position at a sixth-floor window, and, waiting in ambush for almost an hour, shot the president as the motorcade passed below. The possibility that he had assistance—for example, someone setting off a firecracker as a diversion—can never be precluded. But the real question is not how but why Oswald assassinated the president.

The most obvious motive was provided

by Oswald himself in his letter from Moscow: to kill any American who put on a uniform against his cause. He openly subscribed to the terrorist creed that a man with a rifle could change history; and, as far as Oswald was concerned, President Kennedy and Gen. Walker were both actively working to destroy his avowed hero—Castro.

Whether Oswald, given his clear disposition toward killing an American leader, was prodded or otherwise induced into committing the assassination was the question that vexed American intelligence after the shooting. In the midst of his stay in the Soviet Union, Oswald had disappeared for more than a year, without yielding a trace of what, if any, training and indoctrination he had undergone. The only record of this missing year was a "diary" he brought out with him, which had in fact been written in two days presumably to provide him with a consistent cover story or legend.

His five days with the Cubans in Mexico City were also a blank—although friendly sources within the Cuban Embassy indicated that he was pressured to prove his loyalty and worth. Although the Cuban government insisted, through both official and intelligence channels, that Oswald was presumed crazy and dismissed as such by the embassy staff, it left unanswered the disturbing question of why a visa was approved for Oswald—after the report was received from the embassy.

Among the 11 questions prepared by the CIA for Mexican interrogators immediately after Oswald's arrest on Nov. 22, 1963, was one that expressed its direct concern: "Was the assassination of President Kennedy planned by Fidel Castro . . . and were the final details worked out inside the Cuban Embassy?"

In Dallas, before Mexican investigators could question their sources, Oswald was shot dead, and with his death ended the hope of unraveling his motive.

Mr. Epstein, author of "Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth" and "Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald," is currently completing a book on international deception.