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The devious path to Dallas

By Hugh Thomas

EDWARD JAY EPSTEIN:

Legend

The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald

398pp. Hutchinson. £5.50.

Croce thought that a history of the world could be written from a study of the events surrounding the murder of Henri IV in 1610. A history of the second half of the twentieth century seems already to be being constructed around the murder of Kennedy in 1963. Edward Jay Epstein has previously published a clinical analysis of the Warren Commission, suggesting that they found what they wanted to find. In his new book he accepts a conventional version of the events of November 22, 1963, in a laconic appendix: a new look at the autopsy shows that the bullets which killed Kennedy came from above and behind. Ballistical evidence suggests that the shots were fired by the Mannlicher-Carcano rifle found on the sixth floor of the Texas Book Depository after the murder. Oswald had a rifle of that make and his finger-prints were found on the one in the book depository. The murderer had seven seconds for his three shots, since an oak tree between the depository and the road had, it seems, lost its leaves in November, so giving more time than the 5.6 seconds allowed by the Warren Commission.

Oswald's behaviour after the shooting was not that of an innocent man: he was in the book depository at the time of the shooting, and could easily have been, alone, on the sixth floor; he rushed off, changed his clothes, armed himself with a revolver, used it to murder the first policeman whom he saw (Officer Tippett) and resisted arrest by trying to shoot another policeman. During interrogation, Oswald told numerous lies. Some of these points will hardly be accepted as they stand by hardened students of these matters but, tempting though it is to linger on them or on similar details, Epstein's new book deals with a different question: who was Oswald? Epstein has worked hard, from interviews with Oswald's acquaintances and by examining papers of the FBI, CIA and other agencies of the United States Government made available under the Freedom of Information Act, to give a picture of a man more intelligent than the one-dimensional "loner" whom even the

informed public, occupied by such rumours as that of the man on the grassy knoll, has come to accept. Oswald, for example, scored "better than average" in his aptitude tests (verbal section), in order to be admitted into the United States Marines in 1956; and he impressed a Jesuit college in Louisiana in 1963 as being as articulate as a graduate.

The new Oswald presented by Epstein's study is a much more curious individual even than that would imply. Oswald was "interested in Marxism" in his teens and applied to join the Socialist Party of America's youth section in the same month that he enlisted in the Marines. Epstein's suggestions are that this alleged "loner" had many strange connections: that he may have been an agent of the Russians while still a Marine; that his service at Atsugi air base in Japan may have enabled him (then or later) to tell the Russians the height flown by the CIA's famous United States reconnaissance aeroplane and to assist them to shoot down the UZ in 1960; that Oswald, during his two-and-a-half years in Russia from the end of 1959 till the middle of 1962, was recruited as an agent by the KGB; that Oswald met Valery Kostikov, member of a section of the KGB which allegedly deals with assassination and sabotage, in Mexico in October 1963; and that Oswald went ahead with his savage crime as some kind of a tit-for-tat for the attempts which the Kennedy administration were making on the life of Castro in Cuba. Epstein also suggests that the Russians sent a bogus defector, a "disinformation expert", Yuri Nosenko, to persuade the CIA and FBI that Oswald had been regarded in Russia as just as much of a crank as he had been in the United States. Nosenko, Epstein argues, was successful in this mission and is now a consultant to the former agency (on African problems?) which has, it seems, been destructively rent apart by the consequent internal controversy. Both the CIA and FBI also apparently neglected to tell the Warren Commission what little they knew of Oswald's background, presumably for fear of criticism.

Since these are among the most sensational accusations that anyone can possibly make, particularly taking into account the still enduring golden memory of the Kennedy days, it is as well to realize that Epstein does not actually make charges along these lines; he insinuates them. There is no sum-

ming-up to the book, only an appendix listing further questions which the author would like to have answered by the FBI and CIA. This reticence on Epstein's part seems quite wrong; for most readers who will skim through this readable and skillfully organized book will be left with an uneasy feeling that something like the series of events described in the preceding paragraph actually happened, and will be unable, through lack of background information, to subject Epstein's tales to critical consideration. Let me, therefore, try to do just that.

First of all, however, there is Oswald's character. When Oswald joined the Marines, "no psychological abnormalities" were noted. But Oswald at sixteen was unusual and unusual for a Marine in particular. He had had an unhappy childhood, pushed from pillar to post, the posthumous child of a Louisiana insurance salesman. Oswald's mother brought up her three children with difficulty, in decaying circumstances, in various parts of Louisiana and Texas. Oswald, however, became president of his eighth-grade class in a New York public school even if he was reprimanded for refusing to salute the United States flag. The Marines in the post-McCarthy era must have been more tolerant a corps than anyone would have expected. A teenage rebel is not necessarily a traitor and murderer, but a teenage rebel in the Marines would be liable to have his rebelliousness enhanced, particularly since Oswald continued, as a Marine, to express dislike of United States foreign policy. He also began to learn Russian while still enlisted—and even came to be regarded as a Russophile. On Oswald's putative treachery when in the Marines, Epstein produces little evidence. In Japan, Oswald had a number of friendships with high-class prostitutes whom he could not have afforded out of his Marine pay, and he claimed (though the source of this is suspect) to have had contacts with the Japanese Communist Party. In a deliberately sensational passage, Epstein leaves the reader to suppose that Oswald (or anyone else) might have murdered a fellow Marine on sentry duty. Would a good agent have done that? Then, if the KGB recruited Oswald at that time, he would presumably have been asked to remain a Marine rather than be allowed to leave intemperately in the summer of 1959 to go to Russia.

Epstein's case against Oswald during his stay in Russia is much more solid. When Oswald arrived in Moscow he told the United States consul not only that he wanted to give up his citizenship but also that he would tell the Russians what he knew about the radar on which he had been working as a Marine. The "defector" Nosenko said in 1964 that Oswald had not been investigated by the KGB in Russia, but that can hardly be true. As Epstein argues, a United States Marine with experience at a base where new weapons were kept would be certain to be questioned by a Russian intelligence service, particularly if the informant concerned expressly wanted to tell all. Then, most of what was previously known outside Russia of Oswald's stay derives from a "diary" which he kept of his time as a checker in the Byelorussian radio and television factory at Minsk. Epstein suggests that the diary was concocted a year after the events it purports to describe, after Oswald had told the United States Embassy that he wanted to return to the United States, and it certainly seems to have been written (or copied) in two long bursts of handwriting. A great deal of evidence also suggests that Oswald lived better, and in a better flat, than would have been possible for someone living on a "checker's" wages, and that he mixed with the children of the Soviet elite in Minsk.

Epstein shows, by means of an interesting street-map of Minsk, that half a mile from Oswald's flat there was (is) a KGB training school. He suggests (and even here "suggests" is a better indication of Epstein's method than "argues") that during the first half of his time in Russia Oswald was undergoing training, and during the second half was constructing a false "legend" for himself as a disillusioned defector (writing that he found Soviet restrictions on travel intolerable; that he did not like the opening of mails, etc.). Epstein says that, when he did want to leave Russia, both Oswald and his new Russian wife, Marina, got their exit visas "in a matter of days" — a quite exceptional, even unique, thing so far as the wife was concerned. The alleged "disinformation" agent, Nosenko, explained that suspicious occurrence to the CIA by saying that Marina had already shown "antisoviet characteristics", but it is not at all clear what those were, nor why, even if they had been shown, that would have helped her. Epstein has constructed a family tree for Marina, Oswald (a mysterious person still), also fatherless, showing that the uncle with whom she was living in Minsk was a colonel in the internal security service (MVD). Why should that uncle, and other well-placed relations, have agreed to Marina's marriage to Oswald, particularly when the marriage was arranged after Oswald had applied to the United States Embassy to return to America?

Of course, there are many possible explanations for these and other suspicious occurrences, but those of Nosenko, the man who, according to himself, was dealing with Oswald's case when in the KGB, only serve to increase our suspicions. By and large, Epstein seems to make his point that Oswald may have been recruited as a Soviet agent in 1959-62. An agent in what respect? To do what? That, of course, we cannot expect to know for some time yet. The CIA, apparently recorded a conversation in October 1963 between Oswald in Mexico and the Soviet Embassy in which he is supposed to have said that Kostikov was "looking after his case", and Kostikov, as earlier suggested, was an ugly customer.

It is, however, a long way from being a Russian agent to being the murderer of a President. Back in the United States in June 1962, Oswald embarked on a series of unsuccessful jobs, all in either Louisiana or in Texas where his brothers and mother were living. Only one of these jobs could have had any value for any putative Russian master: a short appointment helping the production of maps for the CIA, who, it seems, took no trouble to investigate Oswald on his return. But there was one person who did his best to try and settle Oswald in a good job and among Russian-speaking friends: that was a Russian-born United States immigrant, possibly an ex-Nazi agent, self-nominated as a man of mystery, "George de Mohrenschildt". This individual apparently exercised some influence over Epstein as well as over Oswald, but unfortunately, in the middle of one of Epstein's interviews with him, he was found shot dead, after lunch, in Palm Beach. Suicide or murder? Epstein asserts the former but insinuates the latter. Another insinuation, though it is scarcely put even as positively as that, is that this "extraordinarily handsome individual" was, as it were, Oswald's supervisor on behalf of the KGB; during their early months in the United States, Mohrenschildt introduced the Oswalds to his many friends, and the persistent kindness of those Russian Americans to this awkward pair is almost the only heartening (or human) thing to figure in this chronicle of deception. Epstein leaves open the possibility that Mohrenschildt was really helping

the CIA, not the KGB; but that seems a little unlikely since, on his own admission to Epstein, Mohrenschildt became aware that Oswald had a rifle shot, as it were, with his rifle, against the right-wing General Walker in Dallas in April 1963. After that failed attempt at murder, Mohrenschildt never saw Oswald again. He left for Haiti. That sudden journey is left unexplained by Epstein. It is, however, as if Mohrenschildt washed his hands of his charge at that point.

In the middle of 1963, Oswald was busy with a number of curious

undertakings such as founding a chapter of the "Hands off Cuba Committee" in New Orleans and also, clumsily, trying to get to know anti-Castro Cubans in that city by extravagant offers of help to them. All this is certainly hard to square with the interpretation that Oswald was at that time a Soviet spy. Why should he draw attention to himself in such a way? There are two possible explanations (neither offered by Epstein): first, that the attack on General Walker finished Oswald with the Russians, who presumably knew of the matter via Mohrenschildt. A new career as a radical might have seemed to Oswald to be something to help him back into Soviet good books. The second explanation is that, though still in touch in some way with the Russians (but on what basis?), he nevertheless seriously wanted to go to Cuba and, rightly, thought that a career with the "Hands off Cuba Committee" might help him when he came to ask for a Cuban visa, which he did in Mexico in October 1963.

We are entering deep waters. Please pause here for breath and, if possible, take on board a Cuban pilot. The CIA had been trying for over three years by then to overthrow Castro's government in Cuba. The attempt, an armed invasion by exiles failed at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961. Afterwards, the CIA turned to murder. At first, they made use of the Mafia, whose leaders in the United States knew Cuba well and wanted to get back their profitable casinos, brothels, and protection rackets there. Those plans at murder were very badly arranged and failed. In 1963, the CIA were putting their faith in an agent whom they named "Amlash". Amlash was Rolando Cubela (not "Cubella"), a minor minister in Castro's government, the very picture (as I can attest from personal memory of him, the previous summer) of the new master class after a successful revolution, bearded, swaggering and cigar-smoking even if middle-class in origin. He was an inappropriate person to lead a democratic rebellion against Castro, since not only had he murdered a police chief in 1956 but he had been Castro's hatchet man in the University of Havana in 1960 (defeated in an election for the presidency of the student union, Cubela drove out the successful candidate, Pedro Luis Boitel, by intimidation). But he seemed reliable to the CIA in September 1963, and he made an offer to kill Castro to a representative of that agency in Brazil, where he chanced to be on a Cuban official mission. The CIA welcomed the idea. Castro, meantime, at a party at the Brazilian Embassy in Havana (a coincidence? or a warning?) on the same day told a reporter of the Associated Press that, if the United States went ahead with "terrorism" against Cuban leaders; Cuba would reply in kind. That story was published in the United States on September 9, among other places in a paper in New Orleans, while Oswald was still there.

Cubela, even if he was not a double agent, did not look as if he was a good person to keep secrets. When ultimately he was tried in 1966 for trying to shoot Castro he was condemned to death, but his life was spared on Castro's insistence. In 1963, he was apparently persisting in his activities against Castro. At the end of October, he said that, before he went ahead and shot his leader, he wanted a personal assurance from the Kennedy administration that they would support him afterwards. A well-known CIA man from Washington, Desmond Fitzgerald, met Cubela as the personal representative of Robert Kennedy (it is not clear what that meant) and gave him the required assurance. Cubela wanted a rifle with a telescopic lens and a means of delivering a poison injection. Fitzgerald later agreed to get a CIA man to discuss that idea with Cubela in Paris on November 22. Cubela, therefore, thought that the Kennedy administration meant business, though the question whether the President himself, or Robert Kennedy, knew what their representatives were up to is not, I think, fully resolved. At all events, and Epstein is right to bring up this side of the story, Cubela must have thought that they did know; and, if Cubela was telling Castro what he himself knew, the Cuban Government did, too. Other representatives of Kennedy seemed at that time to be talking of peace with Cuba. That might have made United States' actions seem even more perfidious.

Oswald went to Mexico at the end of September 1963 with the intention, he said, of getting a visa for Cuba, and thence travelling back to Russia (why? it is not evident). At that time there was no Cuban consul in the United States. The Cuban consul in Mexico gave Oswald a transit visa to the Soviet Union but the Russians did not give their answer in time (Oswald had permission to be in Mexico for only a limited number of days) and Nosenko subsequently said that, from Moscow, he turned down Oswald's request. It was, however, at this time that Oswald saw the man in the KGB whom he claimed to be concerned with his affairs, Kostikov. He also talked of killing Kennedy while at the Cuban Embassy. These facts were known by the CIA but they seem to have done nothing about it, presumably on the basis that if a man talks of killing a President he probably won't. It was doubtless hard to follow up every individual who said that he was going to shoot the President. What transpired at the Cuban and Soviet embassies in Mexico we shall presumably never know. One must remember, however, that if Oswald had already decided to kill Kennedy, he must have also been considering both his escape, or his trial and his alibi. Unfortunately, Epstein speculates on none of this. When Oswald returned from Mexico he took a job in the Texas Book Depository in Dallas, when it was presumably known already that, a fortnight later, the President's cavalcade

would pass before it. At all events, the President was indeed shot there on November 22. Ruby killed Oswald on November 24.

Two months later, at the end of January 1964, Nosenko "defected" and started telling his interrogators that Oswald had been "of no interest whatsoever" in Russia. Oswald, he said, had been allocated to Minsk by chance. After endless interrogation Nosenko was judged by the CIA counter-espionage department to be a fraud. Unfortunately, for those who decided that, the FBI had another agent, among the Russian members of the United Nations secretariat known as "Fedora" who had reported independently that Nosenko was what he claimed to be. Edgar Hoover believed in "Fedora" and the CIA was ultimately worsted in their arguments with Hoover. ~~Hoover's~~ ~~decision~~ ~~on~~ ~~Nosenko~~ ~~was~~ ~~reversed~~ ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~men~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~CIA~~ ~~who~~ ~~had~~ ~~taken~~ ~~the~~ ~~other~~ ~~view~~ ~~were~~ ~~gradually~~ ~~or~~ ~~sharply~~ ~~dismissed~~ ~~leaving~~ ~~Nosenko~~ ~~with~~ ~~\$30,000~~ ~~a~~ ~~year~~ ~~and~~ ~~perhaps~~ ~~other~~ ~~"moles"~~ ~~sniffing~~ ~~about~~ ~~in~~ ~~that~~ ~~discredited~~ ~~service~~. Just as Epstein makes out a good case for thinking that Oswald was recruited as an agent in Russia, he also sustains his suggestions, even when one takes into account that he has talked a great deal with disgruntled ex-officials at the CIA, for thinking that Nosenko was a fraud.

Nevertheless, these things scarcely prove that, when Oswald killed Kennedy, he was doing so on behalf of the Russian and/or Cuban governments. The idea that the Soviet Government in Khrushchev's time in particular wanted to kill Kennedy takes a lot of believing. Capable though the KGB is of murder abroad, its victims have normally been Russian defectors such as Trotsky, Ignace Reiss, certain Ukrainians. Khrushchev's foreign policy was adventurous, but who could have calculated what the effect would have been of the death of such a popular President as Kennedy was? The whole peace de convenience ~~arranged after the missile crisis in~~

October 1962 would have been disturbed even if the murder had remained a mystery (Johnson must have seemed an unknown quantity in the Kremlin), and if the line had pointed back to Russia, it would have been wrecked; and that was the least which could have happened. If the Russians had wished to kill the President, would they have employed a man who obviously had a past leading back to Minsk? Would they have left Oswald to buy his weapon from a Chicago mail-order store, or have failed to arrange his escape? A state criminal on such a scale as would have been needed would have had to have had nerves tougher than Oswald's, such as those of Trotsky's killer, Ramón Mercader del Río. Could it be that there were some people in the KGB, perhaps Kostikov, who wanted to

shoot Kennedy without the Soviet Government's agreement? That too is improbable.

Castro undoubtedly had a motive for wishing to kill Kennedy and no one can doubt Castro's capacity, or audacity, for such a master-murder, such as has occurred before in Cuban history. The timing of Cubela's mission and the dating of the further rendezvous with the CIA warn us of this possibility. But it is hard to believe that Cuba would have gone ahead, at such a time, with such a murder, without Russian approval. If such a crime had been traced back to Cuba instead of to Russia, its obvious result would have been a new invasion of Cuba, and one to which the full strength of the United States would have been committed. Were there some Cubans who believed from what they knew of the Kennedy administration's attitude to Castro that Kennedy had a vendetta against Castro that only the former's death would end? Certainly Kennedy from time to time was obsessed by Cuba and, in the end, his administration might have sought to reverse, for public and personal reasons, the defeat which it had suffered at the Bay of Pigs. But there were in Cuba people intelligent enough to remember that Eisenhower's administration had begun the policy of covert operations against Cuba, and that the Kennedy one had merely continued them; that Presidents might come and go, but the CIA would go on forever; as it indeed did after 1963, along with other plots against Cuba, and against Castro—even Cubela's last mission was not till 1966.

Though Oswald perhaps was, or had been, an agent of the Soviet Union, he seems, therefore, to have been acting on his own in November 1963—or at the least, not for the Russians or Cubans. He may have lost his credibility with his masters (if they were his masters) after the attempt on General Walker. He may have tried to implicate either the Russians or the Cubans, or both, in his designs to kill Kennedy during his visit to Mexico, but there is nothing to show that he was successful: common sense suggests he was not, though he may have received sympathy from some individuals which he may have mistaken for official approval. Then, later on, in January, the Russians, realizing that Oswald might be identified as an agent, surely may have sent Nosenko off on his mission to fend off the consequences of such an identification. As to Oswald's own motives, one can still only speculate, even at the end of Epstein's book: could he have hoped in the end for approval from Cuba or Russia? Or was he simply determined to enter history in a violent manner, if only through the Traitor's Gate? Or, thwarted of Soviet approval, did he turn in the days before the murder to others whom he may have realized by then hated Kennedy? The Mafia? The Cuban exiles? These suggestions are not explored here: Epstein has doubtless in these ideas (with which he is certainly

familiar) a theme for another work. For by now it is widely known that Jack Ruby, who prevented Oswald being taken to trial, had been for a long time associated with the Mafia in Chicago, Havana and also in Dallas.

This book includes many extraordinary stories. The author's account of the CIA's arguments with the FBI is disturbing to anyone who realizes that good intelligence is one essential part of preserving the nuclear peace. No one can feel, after reading Epstein, that the West's intelligence was in the capable hands that it should have been between 1960 and 1970, nor that the results of the case of Nosenko have ensured that they are in better hands now.