

BOOKS

Oswald and The Soviets

LEGEND: THE SECRET WORLD OF LEE HARVEY OSWALD. By Edward Jay Epstein. 382 pages. Reader's Digest Press/McGraw-Hill. \$12.95.

Here we go again. After all the second-gun theories, two-Oswald theories and other assorted "revelations" of who *really* killed JFK, Edward Jay Epstein has come up with an intriguing new line on the assassination. Oswald did it all right, says Epstein, but he was a man with a sensational and so far secret past. Among other things, this book hints that when he was in Russia, Oswald divulged secrets about the U-2 spy plane that enabled the Russians to shoot down Gary Powers in 1960 and that after the Kennedy assassination, a Soviet agent "defected" to the U.S. to try to persuade Washington that Oswald had no connection with the KGB. Epstein even suggests that there was (or is) a highly placed Soviet agent in the top echelons of U.S. intelligence.

This is heady stuff, and two cautions ought to be entered right away. First, not all of it is persuasive, and second, it is hard to tell how much of it Epstein himself believes because his book rattles with loose innuendoes and undrawn conclusions. But his research has produced some interesting new material. Examples:

- As a marine, Oswald was stationed at Atsugi Air Base in Japan, from which U-2's operated. He was a radar technician with access to information about the U-2's cruising altitude and rate of ascent.
- When he went to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow to renounce his American citizenship, Oswald said he intended to give the Russians information about his radar work. He was subsequently treated very well in Russia: set up in a good apartment in Minsk (where the KGB had a training center), given a monthly stipend, allowed to live a life that included hi-fi equipment and weekend hunting trips.
- Two months after Kennedy was killed, a KGB officer named Yuri Nosenko defected in Geneva. Brought to the U.S., he insisted that the KGB had never had anything to do with Oswald. But intensive interrogation caught him in a number of lies and mistakes, and the CIA's Soviet Russia division concluded that the Russians had sent him to knock down any notion that the U.S.S.R. was linked to the Kennedy assassination (this conclusion was later overruled).

What are we to make of all this? At no point does Epstein suggest that Oswald was acting on Soviet orders when he killed Kennedy. But he does suggest any number of less dramatic possibilities: that Marina Oswald may have been a



The National Archives

The Oswalds on train leaving Russia, Epstein (left): Did he tell U-2 secrets?



Joan Bingham

Soviet agent, that Oswald's re-defection to the U.S. was engineered by the Russians, that Washington's decision to accept Nosenko at face value was a product of bureaucratic cover-up and perhaps even of the influence of a highly placed Soviet double agent. Personally, I'm not persuaded—except that it seems hard to believe that the Russians did not debrief Oswald about his Marine experience. Epstein pays little attention to a thesis that many of his own facts support: that Oswald was an erratic, self-important nut whom the Russians were only too glad to be rid of.

Nods and Winks: Epstein deserves credit for some arduous and valuable research, but he damages his work by his odd reluctance to say what he thinks his evidence shows. His "just-the-facts-ma'am" approach, studded with rhetorical nods and winks, neatly avoids responsibility for any of the wilder conclusions he hints at. Certainly he is not incapable of weighing evidence: in an appendix, he offers a tightly argued brief for Oswald's guilt in the Kennedy assassination. Epstein made his reputation with a book that accused the Warren Commission of rushing

its report into print in a form intended to be reassuring. It is hard to escape the impression that here Epstein has rushed his notes into print in a form intended to be sensational.

—KENNETH AUCHINCLOSS

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