

Michael Novak

The 'Legend' of Lee Harvey Oswald

One of the most important books of 1978, Edward Jay Epstein's "Legend," raises several uncomfortable questions about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and indirectly about SALT. Now that the House Committee on Assassinations reports that "probably" a second gunman fired a shot in addition to the three shots fired by Lee Harvey Oswald, Epstein's research on Oswald gains new significance.

Witnesses at the residence of Gen. Edwin A. Walker, at whom a single shot was fired by Lee Harvey Oswald seven months before the Kennedy assassination, reported that two men left the scene of the shooting in two cars. If Oswald worked with another assassin on that occasion, might he not also have done so on Nov. 22, 1963? Could this assistant have been the second assassin hypothesized by the House committee?

Oswald was not what he appeared to be. Epstein shows convincing evidence that Oswald was a dedicated communist from the age of 15, that Oswald began studying Russian while he was a Marine in Japan, that Oswald had extensive contacts with Japanese communists, and probably, too, with the KGB in Japan.

Oswald was a radar pilot for all Allied air operations in the Pacific, and had invaluable information about Allied air power, procedures, patterns and operations. At the trial of U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers, shot down over the U.S.S.R. some months after Oswald's arrival in Moscow, Oswald was conspicuously present. Oswald had planned his defection to Moscow in 1959 for almost a year. It is possible that he made the last leg of his trip on a KGB private plane. Moreover, he received high privileges while in the U.S.S.R., mingling with the top elite under the special protection of the regional head of the secret police.

Before his sudden return to the United States, Oswald wrote a fake story — a "legend" — about his experiences in Russia. In reality, he was given plenty of money in the U.S.S.R., a beautiful apartment, a rifle club, many attractive women, access to the society of the elite. He also, apparently, had special KGB training. Suddenly, he asked to come home.

He was never formally debriefed by the CIA or FBI after he returned. He changed residence often, sometimes monthly, disappeared periodically, and — amazingly — found work in a photographic shop which did top secret map work for the Defense Department, where he had access to the names of Russian and Chinese places superimposed on aerial surveillance maps.

Oswald was set up in Dallas by a notorious figure in international espionage, George de Mohrenschildt, who later committed suicide during a break while answering questions Epstein put to him.

Early in 1964, after Kennedy's assassination, a defector from the KGB showed in Geneva whose mission seemed to be to deny any contact between the KGB and Oswald. Many in the CIA believed that this defector — Yuri Nosenko — was a plant. His story contained glaring discrepancies and some outright lies. In recent years, Nosenko has been accepted as a genuine defector and works closely with the CIA. Many who mistrusted him have lost their jobs at the CIA; many who trusted him are now in office. He turned the CIA "inside out," according to Epstein.

It happens that the Nosenko case touches two others. A high Russian double agent at the United Nations, code name "Pedora," who reported directly to J. Edgar Hoover, assured Hoover that Nosenko was genuine and was telling the truth about Oswald. In recent months, a highly placed Soviet official at the U.N. has defected to the U.S. Often such defections occur when the Soviets wish to plant false information.

Almost simultaneously, a top CIA expert on Soviet strategic arms capabilities, John Arthur Paisley, disappeared from his sloop on Chesapeake Bay. A week later, a body, possibly not his, was found. According to Tad Szulc in The New York Times Sunday Magazine (Jan. 7), the ends of the fingers were mutilated. The fingerprint files for Paisley are missing from the FBI files. Paisley was in charge of providing top secret briefings to the CIA "B" team, evaluating the Soviet nuclear capabilities. Paisley was a frequent visitor to Nosenko's home in North Carolina.

Is it possible that the sudden, unexplained death of Paisley is related to the defection of the Soviet diplomat at the U.N., to the satellite spy penetration, and to Nosenko? Who killed Paisley? Which side? Why?

The possibility that the KGB has penetrated the highest levels of U.S. intelligence must be faced, and the question resolved, before a SALT agreement can be reached. It appears that the Soviets have known for some time how our satellite verification system works and how to deceive it. It also appears that they can influence from within our top-level perception of their capabilities. We do not, I think, wish to be at their mercy.