

Conspiracy Revisited

Russian files fuel theories of Oswald's connections

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Long-secret documents recently handed to President Bill Clinton by Russian President Boris Yeltsin raise new questions about possible special treatment that top Soviet officials accorded Lee Harvey Oswald on his arrival in Moscow four years before President John F. Kennedy's assassination. The documents immediately generated fresh conspiracy claims from assassination theorists.

Within hours of Oswald's arrest as Kennedy's assassin in 1963, the documents also revealed, the Soviet ambassador to Washington sent a top-secret coded message to the Kremlin reporting "there is nothing that compromises us" in correspondence with Oswald and his wife. The ambassador said the Soviets might discuss this correspondence with U.S. authorities "as a last resort." But there was no explanation of why the Soviets feared being compromised or why they would cooperate with the United States only as a last resort. Oswald, Kennedy's accused assassin, arrived in Moscow from Finland as a tourist on Oct. 15, 1959.



Lee Harvey Oswald

AP Photo, 1963

holding a six-day visa. He was an unknown former Marine not quite 20 years old. Yet, once he arrived, the documents show, memos about him circulated among top Soviet officials — including a deputy premier, the foreign minister and the head of the KGB spy agency.

The documents reveal that the officials approved plans to permit Oswald to stay in the Soviet Union for at least a year, to give him a job and an apartment, provide him with 5,000 rubles to furnish the apartment and 700 rubles a month in spending money.

Although some information about Oswald's defection to Moscow had previously been made available to American investigators, the level of early interest shown by high Soviet officials was not generally known. State Department officials, American intelligence sources and Russian officials say they have no ready explanation for that interest. "These events took place 35 to 40 years ago," one U.S. intelligence official said. "There aren't many people still around here or in Russia, who remember the details."

Lem Johns, one of the Secret Service agents guard-

ing Kennedy's motorcade in Dallas at the time of the assassination and later assistant Secret Service director in charge of protective operations, said he found the involvement of the foreign minister, deputy premier and KGB chief highly unusual. "People of that rank have a lot to worry about besides some kid tourist," he said. "They might have felt he threatened them in some way for them to show that much interest. What kind of threat did he pose? Or could there have been something else?"

Some conspiracy theorists suggested the "something else" might have been a plot by the Soviets to use Oswald in killing Kennedy. The Warren Commission and other U.S. agencies that have investigated the assassination said they found no evidence of Soviet involvement. But they apparently did not have access to all the Russian documents given to Clinton.

University of Maryland history professor John Newman, author of "Oswald and the CIA" and a consultant on the assassination film "JFK," called some of the Russian documents "highly significant." Until now, he said, he and other conspiracy theorists could only speculate on Soviet conclusions. "Now we know their conclusions — that a right-wing conspiracy

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was responsible for the assassination, that the U.S. government wanted to consign the case to oblivion, and that the plot was designed to make it look like Oswald was employed by the KGB," Newman said.

A parallel observation on Oswald's Soviet experience came from another conspiracy theorist, Debra Conway, who heads the JFK Lancer (his Secret Service code name) assassination research organization. "My opinion is that Oswald was there for some reason," Conway said in a telephone interview from her headquarters in Lake Forest, Calif. "There had to be some type of program. Oswald was a low-level operative for our government — or at least he thought so."

A State Department translation of one of the Russian-language documents shows that on the day of the assassination, Nov. 22, 1963, Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin sent a top-secret coded telegram marked "highest priority" from Washington to the Kremlin. It reported that Oswald had been arrested in the assassination and publicly identified as a former defector to the Soviet Union, "where he married Marina Nikolayevna Prusakova (b. 1941)."

The Oswalds moved to the United States in 1962, the message said. Marina Oswald applied in March, 1963, to return to the Soviet Union with their daughter, but not her husband. Dobrynin wrote that both Oswald and his wife had written Soviet officials about the request.

"The last letter from Lee Oswald was dated Nov. 9," the coded Dobrynin message said. "It is possible that the U.S. authorities may ask us to familiarize them with the correspondence in our possession. The U.S. authorities are aware of the existence of this final correspondence, since it was conducted through official mail. Inasmuch as there is nothing that compromises us in this correspondence, we might agree to do this as a last resort (after removing our internal correspondence with the MFA)." The MFA was the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

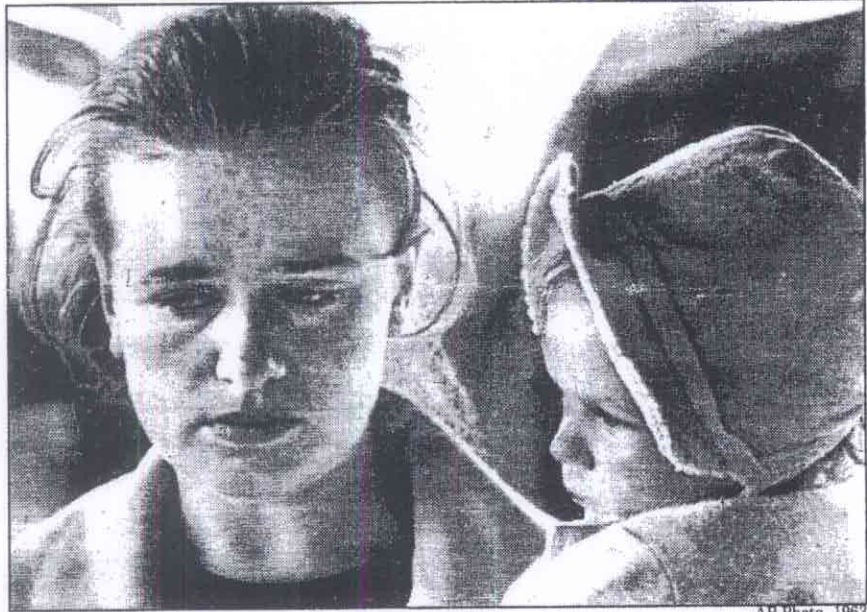
Numerous documents Yeltsin turned over to Clinton at a June summit meeting detail the high-level interest shown in Oswald upon his arrival in Moscow, where he renounced his American citizenship and asked for permanent residence. When Oswald reached Moscow, top-secret reports about him were sent to such officials as Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, Deputy Premier Mikhail Porfirovich and KGB chief Aleksandr Nikolaevich Shelepin.

Gromyko and Shelepin recommended to the Soviet Communist Party's Central Committee: "It should be advisable to grant him the right of temporary sojourn in the USSR for one year and to provide him

employment and housing. In such case, the question of Oswald's permanent residency in the Soviet Union and his receiving Soviet citizenship could be resolved upon the expiration of that period."

The central committee approved the recommendation, granting Oswald expense money, directing "the Byelorussian Economic Council to find employment for Oswald as an electrician and the Minsk City Council of Workers Deputies to assign him a separate small apartment." Oswald later was granted permission to remain indefinitely in the Soviet Union, but he returned to the United States after three years.

The 80 documents turned over by Yeltsin also included a top-secret draft resolution prepared by



AP Photo, 1963

Marina Oswald and daughter, June, view the body of Lee Harvey Oswald, who was killed in police custody after being arrested for the assassination of President Kennedy.

Gromyko for the central committee, purporting to "debunk" American press reports connecting the Soviet Union and Cuba to the assassination. The central committee approved the resolution and instructed Dobrynin to issue a terse report to American authorities "in the event they ask you about" Oswald's activities in the Soviet Union.

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev sent his deputy, Anastas Mikoyan, to represent him at Kennedy's funeral. From Washington, Mikoyan sent a top-secret coded message to the Kremlin reporting on a private conversation with former U.S. Ambassador to Moscow Llewellyn Thompson. He said Thompson told him Soviet press allegations that right-wingers were responsible for the assassination had brought American counter-assertions of "Communist and Cuban connections."

The deputy premier said he told Thompson the Soviet Union did "not want to make complications" but resented such implications when the case had not even been fully investigated. Mikoyan said the U.S. government "clearly prefers to consign the whole business to oblivion as soon as possible."