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Penkovsky and Me

Oleg Penkovsky and I were reporters in Moscow in the 1960s, with a few differences. He was a Soviet military intelligence officer, the West's premier spy since World War II, who reported clandestinely to the CIA and the British MI6. I was The Post's correspondent. He was rolled up to get him out of the way in the Cuban missile crisis, and executed. I, in retaliation for The Post's later serialization of his "papers" (in which I had no part), was kicked out. He had better sources.

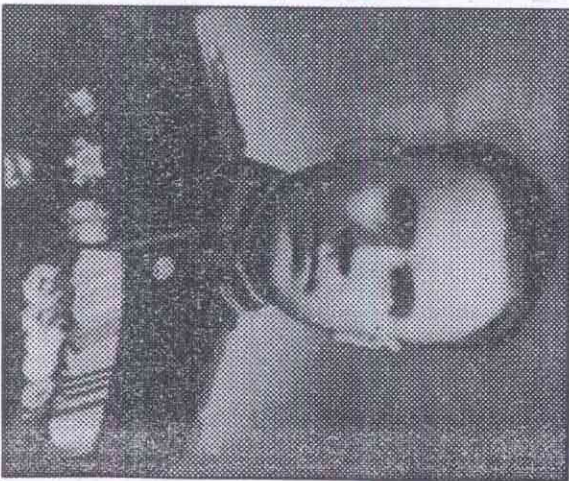
You will detect a personal interest, although we never met. But more than nostalgia prompts a revisiting of what is for most interested people a familiar Cold War tale. The passage of the old order led a strutting Reagan CIA to open much of the Penkovsky file to Jerrold Schecter, a journalist and writer and old Moscow hand, and Peter Derabin, a former KGB officer and defector who translated "The Penkovsky Papers" of 1965. With the CIA ace in hand, the authors were able to pry out of the glasnost-era KGB some piquant detail, including surveillance photos. Their book, "The Spy Who Saved the World," provides a chance to measure what Penkovsky knew and what we of the American press and public knew at about the same time.

Soviet Union of the 1960s was a discouragingly closed society. He was on the inside, and we newsmen were on the outside. I accept the claim, made when he was exposed and repeated in the new book, that his secrets helped President Kennedy manage the climactic Cold War crises of Berlin and Cuba in 1961-62. Michael Beschloss's comprehensive history of the period provides some confirmation regarding Cuba. Whether Penkovsky "saved the world" may be stretching it.

But of course there is such a thing as insider stuff even in an open democratic society and even, presumably, in a post-Cold War time. So the foreign press need not be too apologetic for missing what Penkovsky the mole knew about Soviet military capabilities and Kremlin political calculations.

Indeed, it should cheer Americans to find confirmation that their government had its own high-level Moscow source and put his "take" to good use—though whether the CIA and MI6 adequately protected Penkovsky is another matter. The narrative of the new book suggests his handlers took shortcuts of "tradecraft" and pushed their difficult and driven agent into a range of increasingly dangerous tasks.

But what about other things that reporters are expected to know in a broad way about a foreign country: not so much the secret plans as the policy choices and dilemmas facing its



leaders, the resources available and not available to them, the resiliency and morale of the society, its general capacity to modernize and adapt?

At that '60s point, before Brezhnev's stagnation, Gorbachev's restructuring and Yeltsin's experiment in free-market democracy, Nikita Khrushchev ran the show. In a view that fit the American liberal consensus of the day, I thought of him as a crude but in some

ways admirable leader (he ended the terror and began exploring coexistence) who was struggling under his system's huge self-imposed handicaps to seek out liberal reform.

By contrast, Penkovsky believed Khrushchev was a tyrant, a fraud and a menace to world peace. He thought the society was corrupt and beyond redemption. His mental image of the problem is conveyed by an astonishing—nutty, actually—solution that he proposed and was personally prepared to put into effect: laying small smuggled-in nuclear weapons at the Kremlin wall to take out Soviet command and control.

Let us say this: Penkovsky knew well the most important immediate thing about the Soviet Union in that moment before the two powers peered into the nuclear abyss at Cuba—that the Kremlin was still dangerous. He also knew the most important long-range thing about Soviet Communism—that the society was rotten to the core. The recklessness as well as the rottenness he knew better than most of the American press.

Even as Penkovsky was being arrested on the Monday of Cuba crisis week, Americans were learning anew of the recklessness. But the proof of the rottenness did not sink in for almost three decades. Not just in the press but in the CIA and elsewhere, an assumption prevailed that the Soviet system could at least muddle through. A pretty good reporter, Penkovsky.