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RUMORS ABOUT LEE HARVEY OSWALD

Introduction

1. Since the assassination of President Kennedy last November, the world public has indulged in a spate of rumor-mongering which is perhaps unprecedented in recent years. The identity of the presumed assassin and the circumstances surrounding his death remain the key elements which underlie lingering doubts about the motives for the crime. Throughout the world, and particularly in Europe, there seems little willingness to believe that Oswald acted alone, and rumors of various assassination conspiracies are widely accepted.

2. There are four major groups of rumors about Oswald. With some variations, they allege that he was involved in a right-wing extremist plot, a conspiracy of organized crime, that he was not the assassin at all, or that he was a Communist agent. Several minor rumors have enjoyed brief popularity. Most of the stories grew out of spontaneous reaction to the events in Dallas, but in two cases they may have been deliberately inspired.

I. A Conspiracy of the Extreme Right

3. The most widely circulated rumor about Oswald holds that he was in some way enmeshed in an assassination plot engineered by right-wing extremists in the United States. Both at home and abroad, this thought was immediately and widely expressed on the afternoon of 22 November. In the brief interval between the attack on the President and the arrest of Oswald, commentators in many parts of the world suggested that the assassination was the work of the Kennedy administration's most violent opponents.

4. While such reactions helped to engender the notion of an ultra-rightist conspiracy, it is now clear that the Soviet Union played a major role

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Name and title of person making the change:

*mmg*  
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in fostering the rumor and in deliberately keeping it alive.

5. As far as can be determined, Radio Moscow was the first news service in the world to suggest that ultra-rightists were responsible for the President's death. Although the first news of the shooting probably reached Moscow no later than 1:40 pm Eastern Standard Time (9:40 pm in Moscow), the Kremlin at first adopted a wait-and-see attitude, and made no announcement of the attack until 2:28 pm. There was considerably less delay following the official announcement from Dallas--at 2:33 pm--that President Kennedy was dead. Some 12 minutes later, Radio Moscow carried the first TASS bulletin on his death, announcing that "as is believed," he had fallen victim to right-wing extremists.

6. By contrast, initial news flashes from Eastern Europe were strictly factual. American news bulletins were repeated promptly and without comment.

7. As soon as the Moscow broadcast was heard, however, East European stations began to fall dutifully into line, and the story began to spread. By 3:30 pm, for example, the Polish and East German radios were quoting TASS that right-wing elements were "believed" to have murdered the President. The Reuters correspondent in Moscow passed the story to London, and Radio Moscow's international service broadcast that "local commentators in Dallas" attributed the assassination to the far right. Several early-morning papers such as Pravda, Izvestia, and the Czechoslovak Rude Pravo--which go to press about midnight (4:00 pm EST)--carried the TASS version on 23 November. It even appeared in South Africa; the Johannesburg Rand Daily Mail printed it under a Rome dateline.

8. The story apparently did not win any immediate credence in Western Europe, however. A Reuters summary of reaction on the continent as of 4:30 pm made no mention of rumors of a conspiracy of any kind. About the same time, a Yugoslav correspondent in Moscow repeated the TASS story, making it clear that belief in an ultra-rightist assassination plot was already widespread in the Soviet capital.

9. The charge against the extreme right was perhaps a "conditioned reflex" response to the assassination. What Moscow generally believed about the political climate in Dallas, Ambassador Stevenson's earlier unhappy experiences there, and even the President's answers to his conservative critics fitted perfectly into the stereotyped Soviet image of the American South. Hoodwinked by its own preconceptions and wishful thinking the Kremlin almost inevitably concluded that President Kennedy had been struck down by his most radical right-wing opponents.

10. Official Moscow appeared to be badly shaken by Oswald's arrest and the ensuing disclosure of his ties to the Soviet Union. The news probably caused some concern that if Washington became convinced the presumed assassin was still affiliated with the USSR, a sudden crisis in Soviet-American relations might result. Furthermore, the arrest of a Communist suspect could easily turn TASS' premature interpretation into a source of embarrassment and adverse world reaction. There was also the problem of how much of the Oswald story could safely be revealed to the Russian people.

11. In short, Moscow faced the necessity of determining the basic line for all its future propaganda on the assassination. The decision, however, was not hastily reached. Circumstantial evidence indicates that the confusion persisted for several hours after Dallas authorities announced that Oswald had been taken into custody.

12. Somewhat ironically, the first sign of indecision came over the same TASS circuits which had originally carried the right-wing allegation. Without mentioning Oswald, the news service continued to report on the President's death until approximately 5:00 pm (EST), or 1:00 am on 23 November in Moscow. Thereafter, its teletypes began a period of extensive idling during which no news of any kind appears to have been transmitted. TASS signed off at 4:30 in the morning (Moscow time) after sending a story on Brazil and another on Ghana, but came back on the air four hours later, apparently without having received any guidance during the night. The opening file contained no further news from Dallas.

13. The bulk of Moscow's news reportage for 23 November was devoted to Khrushchev's sympathy call at the American Embassy and to messages of condolence and public statements by Soviet notables. Oswald was not mentioned until mid-afternoon, when a newscast identified him only as a Dallas resident who had been charged with the assassination.

14. By late evening, the Kremlin had finally decided against any change in its original claim that ultra-rightists had slain the President. At 10:30 pm, some 26 hours after Oswald's arrest, TASS cited "allegations" that Oswald had once resided in the USSR and had a Russian wife, and concluded that the Dallas police were attempting to link the Communist Party with the murder of President Kennedy. The broadcast added, however, that "serious commentators do not take this police version at face value."

15. The Soviet man in the street first learned about Oswald's past on the morning of 24 November, when Pravda acknowledged his previous residence in the Soviet Union. The paper emphasized, however, that he categorically denied any guilt and warned that "certain circles" were attempting to use the crime to "kindle anti-Soviet and anti-Cuban hysteria." Pravda also pointed out that the Secret Service had warned against the trip to Texas because "the most reactionary, violent elements--the Birchites--are nested there." Another article in the same issue quoted the US Communist Party's statement that the murder of the President resulted from the "criminal activities of pro-Fascist, ultra-right forces, Dixiecrats and racists."

16. Soviet propagandists began to exploit news of Oswald's death as soon as it was announced. Radio Moscow set the tone, characterizing the police station shooting as still another indication that events in Dallas had been carefully arranged by a large organization. "Present-day Fascists are trying to raise the ghost of van der Lubbe...Like the German Nazis, they accuse the Communists of the murder of the President." All public information media took up the cry. Similarly drawing a parallel to the Reichstag fire episode, and often asserting that Oswald was not really a Communist at all, they

unleashed a propaganda barrage against the extreme right which diminished only--and rather abruptly--after 30 November, when Ambassador Dobrynin turned over the consular files on Oswald. Since then, Soviet propaganda has paid less attention to the assassination, but the basic line has remained unchanged.

17. The Soviets have been careful, however, to quote Western sources for the allegations they have made. They have used completely divergent views--such as Mark Lane's defense of Oswald in the National Guardian and the John Birch Society's charges of a Communist conspiracy--in expounding their claims that the United States is essentially lawless and that evidence pertaining to the assassination is deliberately being suppressed. They have further tried to becloud the issue by prompt repetition of the more irrational rumors which are still making the rounds in Western Europe.

## II. A Conspiracy of Criminal Interests

18. Although it received only scant attention in the United States and Great Britain, the rumor alleging a connection between Oswald, Ruby and American crime syndicates spread rapidly through Europe. In both Western and Communist countries, it persists as perhaps the second most popular theory about the assassination.

19. The rumor was touched off by the murder of the presumed assassin in the Dallas police station by a man who had a criminal record and some reported connections with the underworld. These circumstances led commentators and journalists to wonder publicly how such a murder was possible and then to suggest some answers of their own. As a result, there are several variations to the basic story. Speculation that Ruby and the Dallas police connived to kill Oswald is, however, common to almost all versions.

20. In contrast to the speed with which Moscow concluded that right-wing elements had carried out the assassination, commentators around the world were relatively slow to place the blame on American underworld organizations. For several days after the shooting of Oswald, most reportage reflected a

nagging concern that Ruby's presence in the police station must have been prearranged. On 26 November, for example, Izvestia asked how a man of Ruby's background and character could evade the strict security measures surrounding Oswald, and in another article suggested that Oswald, Ruby, and the Dallas police were involved in the same plot. In Paris two days later, l'Aurore opined simply that Oswald had been shot to keep him from saying too much. Writing in Zycie Warszawy on 1 December, Polish commentator Wladyslaw Kopalinski doubted that the "true perpetrators" of the assassination will ever be revealed. "The threads are too mixed up which link the anonymous powers, the bribed politicians, the semi-fascist organizations maintained by unknown sources, the police, the gangsters, the underworld, the recreation industry and the sale of narcotics."

21. By mid-December--as Robert Estabrook reported in the Washington Post--several variations of the "organized crime" theme were circulating in Europe. Each commentator and journalist appears to have had his own favorite theory, and it inevitably centered on some group which had opposed--or had been opposed by--the Kennedy administration. One French writer held that "Cosa Nostra" had murdered President Kennedy in retaliation for the disclosures of Valachi and the government's drive against organized crime. He even saw the kidnapping of Frank Sinatra, Jr., as a "warning" to the Attorney General--"a close friend" of the Sinatras. Another reporter asserted that American munitions interests--who would go broke if "peace were to break out"--had hired gangland assassins, but the Soviet Army's Red Star thought Texas oil men had arranged for "Murder, Inc.," to assassinate the President. Several European television and radio stations suggested that Oswald had been in touch with the Mafia, apparently on the strength of their belief that Mexico is a hotbed of Mafia activities and the fact that Oswald had traveled to Mexico. Teamsters union president Hoffa was also considered a likely target for suspicion. One observer noted Oswald's "fanatical interest in unions and the fact that Texas is the scene of a ferocious battle around the teamsters, the truck drivers that Jimmy Hoffa--chief unionist gangster and mortal enemy of Bobby Kennedy--wants

to rule at all costs. Jack Ruby, for his part, was a union organizer for the teamsters....It must be seen if the paths of Ruby and Oswald did not cross in this way."

22. There is no evidence that these rumors had a common source or even that any given commentator or news service preferred one version to the exclusion of the others. Reporters quoted liberally from each other's materials, and distortions were sometimes inevitable. Estabrook's summary of the rumors--reported from Paris on 16 December--is a good example. He claimed the belief that the Dallas police connived in Ruby's murder of Oswald and then attempted to hide the evidence which was widely held in Europe, and provided the following to support his contention: "Reporting from Washington in Le Figaro, Leo Sauvage implied a similar intent in the national investigation. 'The atmosphere developing here around the inquiry is sadly reminiscent of that which marked the Dallas inquiry,' Sauvage wrote."

23. No such implication is evident in Sauvage's story in Le Figaro for 11 December. His comparison of the atmosphere in Washington and Dallas referred to ceaseless commentary on the President's assassination, and he particularly decried the publicity given the FBI's initial findings. Despite the secrecy surrounding the Warren Commission, he wrote, the conclusion that Oswald "beyond doubt" murdered the President was headlined in the New York Times on 10 December. Thus Oswald might well be condemned before he was pronounced guilty by the proper authorities.

24. The prevalence of the "crime syndicate" rumors may stem from the apparent inability of most Europeans to believe that Oswald had acted alone. Writing in Paris Match on 28 December, Raymond Cartier pointed out that while most Americans seemed to accept "FBI leaks" that Oswald was a loner, Europeans rejected the claim "almost universally." He added that they absolutely (his italics) do not believe the "laughable" story that "Ruby--a gangster--acted out of patriotic indignation."

### III. Oswald Was Not the Assassin

25. To a large extent, the belief that President Kennedy was murdered by someone other than

Oswald grew out of the welter of conspiracy rumors. The same circumstances which gave rise to speculation that the events in Dallas were prearranged by some powerful organization apparently led some commentators to carry their guessing one step further. If Oswald were indeed the dupe of a conspiracy, the reasoning seemed to run, then it is possible and even likely that he was not the actual murderer at all.

26. Such a possibility was publicly broached as early as 28 November, when Pravda alluded to a "growing conviction in the United States" that the President had been shot by someone else whom "the Dallas police are carefully protecting." The paper quoted unnamed "specialists" who said it could be "assumed that the attempt was made not by one person" and that shots were fired from more than one rifle. About the same time, French columnists Henri Bordage wrote in Liberation that President Kennedy clearly fell victim to a plot in which the Dallas police, "protectors of gamblers of Ruby's type," played a role which could no longer be regarded as dubious. "The police fabricated a 'guilty one' and staged a play to permit one of their 'appointed' to do away with the 'guilty one.'" On 4 December the Czech party organ Rude Pravo claimed that photographs of the Texas School Book Depository taken minutes before the assassination showed two figures visible in the window from which the fatal shots were fired. The Czechs implied that Ruby may have been the other man in the window because "Jack Rubinstein" and Oswald allegedly knew each other and had met at the "Carousel" a week before the assassination.

27. Speculation concerning Oswald's innocence --particularly in the Soviet Union and the satellites-- increased markedly after the publication of Mark Lane's "defense brief" in the National Guardian for 19 December. Under the headline, "Who Killed Kennedy," Mr. Lane's arguments were serialized verbatim in the Soviet news magazine Nedelya beginning 28 December. An abridged version appeared in Izvestia on 5 January, and within a week, similar summaries had been published in the Polish Zycie Warszawy and the Czechoslovak Rude Pravo. All versions were careful not to tamper with Mr. Lane's words and to emphasize the doubt he cast on Oswald's role in the assassination. All used

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such eye-catching headlines as "Is Oswald the Assassin?" and "Is Kennedy's Murderer Still Free?"

28. In addition to Mr. Lane's text, some satellite papers quickly exploited the sensational version of the assassination which appeared in the Rome neo-fascist daily XX Secolo in early January. According to Secolo's Washington correspondent, Texas political and criminal interests hired Ruby to plan the murder of the President. Ruby in turn hired Oswald, who was to take the blame, and then arranged for Officer Tippit to commit the actual assassination from the window next to Oswald. Tippit was later murdered by Ruby to keep him from revealing what had actually happened. Oswald, realizing he had been duped, hid in a theater, was arrested, and Ruby then silenced him.

29. Both Mr. Lane's arguments and the Secolo story afforded Communist propagandists an opportunity to build on their standard line that right-wing extremists had murdered President Kennedy. Each story fitted neatly into Moscow's comparison of the assassination with the Reichstag fire episode. The assumption that Oswald was not the killer is, of course, inherent in the comparison itself. By portraying him as a latter-day van der Lubbe--the moronic Dutch "Communist" on whom the Nazis blamed the fire--the Soviets insinuated that Oswald was likewise the innocent scapegoat in the plot to blame communism for an act perpetrated by the extreme right. Thus, any suggestion from Western sources that Oswald was not guilty was certain to be used to support Moscow's contentions.

#### IV. A Communist Conspiracy

30. The news that Oswald had once defected to the Soviet Union touched off a small and relatively brief flurry of speculation linking the President's assassination with an international Communist plot. Few of the world's news services seem to have regarded such a possibility very seriously, however, and it received neither the credence nor the widespread dissemination of other "conspiracy" rumors.

31. Both at home and abroad, blame for the slaying was laid to Communists only in isolated instances. On 23 November, for example, the

Phoenix, Arizona Republic headlined that a "pro-Castro Marxist" had been charged with the assassination. Four days later, the Northern Virginia Sun evidently sought to implicate the Kremlin by describing the assassin's bullets as "dum-dums" which were definitely fired from Oswald's rifle and stating in the same story that Representative Charles Kirsten had warned the President in early November that Russian agents were being trained for murder missions in the United States and Great Britain. Foreign commentary was similarly spotty. In South Africa, the daily Vaterland hinted that Communists may have been involved because "they stir up racial hatred." The Parisian Carrefour also saw the racial issue in the assassination, opining that Communists may have been trying to provoke a civil war between American whites and negroes. Liberté Dimanche, however, thought the slaying might have been Moscow's revenge for the Cuban missile crisis.

32. British comment was considerably more reserved. The London Daily Mail stated that Soviet reaction--presumably a reference to the surrender of consular files--helped to dispel the belief that the act was Communist inspired.

33. In the Soviet Union, Oswald's background was first publicized on 24 November, and the following day Pravda took brief cognizance of the possibility that he had actually been a "Communist." Commenting on the reading material found in his room, the party mouthpiece observed that "many of them are publications of the American Trotskyites."

34. The Pravda story clearly seems to have been a gambit played for insurance purposes. Although they evidently thought it unlikely, the Soviets nevertheless realized that the assassination could still provoke a strong anti-Communist reaction in the United States. Thus, they were concerned to demonstrate that Oswald was not a Soviet Communist while leaving open the possibility that he may have been a "Marxist" of sorts. By using the Trotskyite label--which is still anathema throughout the world Communist movement--they sought to direct any latent suspicion away from themselves and specifically on to the Socialist Workers' Party--

the pro-Trotsky organization whose newspaper Militant was found in Oswald's effects.

35. Although the "Communist conspiracy" version of the assassination thus received little more than passing attention throughout the world, it has nevertheless remained as the standard propaganda line of the extreme right wing in the United States. The John Birch Society has been the principal source of the allegation.

36. The Society evidently launched a major effort to publicize its views in mid-December, with a full-page advertisement in the New York Times claiming that Oswald was a Communist who had acted under orders. Robert Welch reiterated the claim in the December issue of the Society's Bulletin later in the month. Mr. Welch alleged, however, that the assassination was the work of the Communist Party, USA and thereby avoided a direct accusation of the Kremlin. Each copy of his article was accompanied by a block of stickers reading "Communism Killed Kennedy."

37. The Society's strongest statement to date appeared in the February issue of its monthly American Opinion. In a 16-page article endorsed by Mr. Welch as a "superb commentary," Professor Revilo Oliver of the University of Illinois implied that President Kennedy had himself worked on behalf of the Soviet Union. The President, he contended, had collaborated with Khrushchev in a "phony embargo" of Cuba designed to conceal the infiltration of Soviet troops and weapons for use against the United States.

38. The article goes on to explain that while he had done much for the Communist cause, President Kennedy was falling behind a scheduled date for the "effective capture of the United States in 1963" and was "rapidly becoming a political liability." Thus, he had to be eliminated. Lee Oswald, an agent "trained in schools for international criminals in the Soviet Union" and repatriated by the "Communist-dominated State Department" was assigned the assassination mission.

39. At least one other group is likewise committed to the proposition that Oswald was a Soviet agent. Sometime in March the Washington Review, a publication of the "American Security Council," is scheduled to appear with an article on the assassination by Professor Stefan Possony of Stanford University's Hoover Institute. Mr. Possony has laboriously and sometimes inaccurately reconstructed Oswald's stay in the Soviet Union, combined his findings with his hypotheses concerning past political assassinations, and concluded that both Lee and Marina Oswald were in the employ of the Soviet government. Although the implication is quite clear throughout the article, Mr. Possony rather surprisingly asserts in his last paragraph that the Oswalds probably were not given the specific task of assassinating the President.

#### V. Other Rumors

40. There have been at least three other minor rumors about Oswald. The first two reflect to some extent the prevailing mood in given geographical areas.

41. Immediate reaction in the newly independent states of Africa indicated a marked propensity to believe that racial fanaticism (as distinct from a full-blown conspiracy of the extreme right) had caused the President's death. Algerian President Ben Bella was one of the first to express this opinion. On learning of the assassination, he issued a statement that President Kennedy "was the object of an attempt perpetrated by partisans of segregation." President Senghor of Senegal made a similar statement the same day. Such sentiments do not appear to have been altered either by the news of Oswald's Communist background or by his own murder. Editorial opinion continued to combine praise for the President's efforts in the field of race relations with suggestions that this work may have been the cause of his death.

42. In the Arab world, however, many commentators seized upon Oswald's murder as an opportunity to make anti-Semitic propaganda. Daily newspapers in Lebanon identified Jack Ruby as a Jew and went on to reason that he killed Oswald in order to thwart

the discovery that "Zionism was behind Kennedy's assassination." The daily al-Siassa, for example, suggested that Zionism's opposition to President Kennedy was assured when he objected to halting American aid to the United Arab Republic. Cairo newspapers also took up the cudgels against Jews. The mass circulation al-Akhbar stated that "those who know our Jewish friends well know they don't get excited or involved unless personal or material interest is concerned," and went on to allege "all this goes to prove it (Oswald's murder) was well planned to hide the motives of Kennedy's assassination."

43. The third of the minor rumors grew up on the United States, where it has hit the press in fits and starts. It had its genesis on 29 November, when Mrs. Pauline Bates of Dallas discussed the manuscript she had been typing for Oswald. Because it contained several remarks which were critical of Soviet life, Mrs. Bates concluded that Oswald may have "been working for the State Department." On 8 December, the Philadelphia Enquirer added a twist to the "American agent" story by asserting that the FBI tried to recruit Oswald as an undercover informant to infiltrate pro-Castro organizations in this country. It remained only for Mrs. Marguerite Oswald, in mid-February, to suggest to newsmen that her son had been an agent of the CIA.

44. In the months since President Kennedy's death, then, his presumed assassin had been rumored to be almost everything from a Soviet intelligence operative to an American secret agent. The rumors have not yet died out, and the trial and conviction of Jack Ruby could well inspire a new round of rumor-mongering throughout the world. That the assassination rumors still persist seems attributable to a public reluctance to believe that Oswald acted alone. Certainly the world press had fed the fires of rumor, and commentary has tended to become more sensational--if less frequent--with the passage of time. With two exceptions, however, there is no evidence of deliberate or malicious intent to

manufacture rumors. In the Soviet Union, communism's propagandists have kept up a drum fire of allegations that the assassination was the work of the extreme right-wing in this country. Those thus accused--the John Birch Society in particular--have answered with equally vociferous claims that President Kennedy fell victim to an international Communist conspiracy.

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Name and title of person making the change:

*M. G.*

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