

# CIA Opened

## 215,000

# Russ Letters

Washington

The Central Intelligence Agency opened and read more than 215,000 letters to and from the Soviet Union for more than 20 years despite advice that the operation was illegal and worthless, former CIA officials testified yesterday.

They told the Senate intelligence committee that they filed reports with top CIA officials in 1961 and 1969 saying the program was of little value but the clandestine mail openings continued until 1973.

One witness, Howard J. Osborne, former director of security for CIA, also said that he was misled by CIA director Richard Helms and other top agency officials about the nature of another mail opening project at the San Francisco post office. No figures were given for this operation.

Osborne said he had been led to believe agents were merely photographing the outsides of envelopes coming from "a country in the Far East."

He said he later learned that many of the Far Eastern letters actually were opened and their contents read and photographed.

In a deposition read into the record, Osborne also said he warned his CIA superiors to close down the full mail-opening project.

"This thing is illegal as hell and we ought to knock it off right

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now in the light of the Watergate climate," Osborne claims he said.

He said agency officials recognized that disclosure would be a tremendous embarrassment to the agency, especially during Watergate.

"In light of some of the disclosures during Watergate it came to the attention of CIA officials that the government shouldn't do things that were illegal," Osborne testified.

Chairman Frank Church (Dem-Idaho) made public CIA documents showing that from 1953 through 1973 CIA agents opened and photographed the contents of 215,820 letters sent to and from the Soviet Union.

Of these, the photographs of 57,846 were sent to the FBI, 31,436 were sent to the Soviet division of the CIA, and 57,894 were sent to other CIA departments.

Osborne said that his connection with the Russian mail-opening operation was to provide the manpower and assistance that kept it going.

"They built the Cadillac and they drove it," he said of his CIA superiors. "I maintained it. I greased it and I changed the oil. I had no authority to say where it was going."

In response to a question, Osborne said: "The maintenance was very good. The product was worthless as far as my opinion went."

Thomas Abernathy said that

in February, 1961, as a member of the CIA Inspector General's office, he prepared a study showing that no tangible operational benefits had accrued from the Soviet mail opening project.

John Glennon conducted a similar study in 1969, which reached an identical conclusion.

"We assumed everybody realized it was illegal," Glennon testified when asked why his report hadn't dwelt on that point.

Gordon Stewart, who was the chief inspector general in 1969, said he understood that Helms, now U.S. ambassador to Iran, knew the mail opening project was illegal.

Helms was sitting in the front room of the hearing room audience as Stewart testified. He is scheduled to testify on the matter today.

Church introduced into evidence CIA files showing that 28,322,796 pieces of mail went through the hands of CIA investigators in New York alone. The envelopes of 2,705,726 letters were photographed.

Church said the testimony presents the clearest example which can be drawn "that the CIA lives outside the law and although all others must obey the law the CIA sits above it."

"You can't run a free society that way," Church said.

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