

# Footnote to a CIA

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**P**ERMIT A former Moscow correspondent to add a footnote to one short paragraph in the 651-page final report of the Senate intelligence committee—the paragraph recounting the particular covert operation of the CIA that got me kicked out of Moscow.

“Another CIA book, ‘The Penkovsky Papers,’ was published in the United States ‘for operational reasons,’ but actually became commercially viable,” the Senate report says. “The book was prepared and written by witting agency assets who drew on actual case materials. Publication rights to the manuscript were sold to a publisher through a trust fund established for the purpose. The publisher was unaware of any U.S. government interest.”

Oleg Penkovsky (the common spelling), you may recall, was a Russian officer who spied for the West 15 years ago. He was caught and killed. His “papers” were published here in late 1965. The *Washington Post* and 29 other papers serialized excerpts. The Russians, failing to get The Post to halt publication, retaliated by closing its Moscow bureau for two years.

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**T**HERE ARE several layers of shabbiness and deceit that need to be pulled off the Penkovsky book now that it has been officially acknowledged as the propaganda action it was.

First, it was precisely the “coarse fraud, a mixture of provocative invention and anti-Soviet slander” that Soviet authorities—sure, the pot calling the kettle black—claimed it was at the time. This does not mean it did not include some of Penkovsky’s own words and thoughts, as well as material provided by the CIA “assets.” The point remains that the book was a CIA fraud published for what the Senate report terms “operational reasons”—presumably to embarrass the Russians in some way. This the book did do,



Oleg Penkovsky hearing his death sentence in a Moscow court in 1963

to judge by the Russians’ screams at the time. Was there some larger point in making the Russians scream? I wonder if the CIA took the screams as proof that the operation was a success. Perhaps someone who knows will tell.

It would also be interesting to know, in view of “editor” Frank Gibney’s pledge in the book that “the bulk of the proceeds” would go to a

# Fraud

fund "to further the cause of genuine peace and friendship between the American and Russian peoples," just how the profits were spent. (I took these various queries to both the Senate and the CIA and got nowhere.)

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**S**ECONDLY, the real victims of this operation were American citizens. Their government gave them to believe that a fraud was a reality: the fraud of the book and the fraud of the particular picture of the Soviet Union drawn in the book—a picture describing Soviet leaders and intentions in terms (high livers, nuclear first-strikers) likely to sober any American who thought it might be worth trying to get along a bit better with the Kremlin.

Unavoidably this raises the question of whether among those "operational reasons" was somebody's conscious desire to deflect the American public from detente. This project was planned, after all, in the years shadowed by President Kennedy's pre-Vietnam, American University overture (October 1963) for improved Soviet-American relations. Were there some unreconstructed bureaucrats who didn't go along? True or not, this is the sort of corrosive suspicion invited by continuing CIA manipulation of our institutions at home.

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**B**UT FINALLY you may say, why did The Washington Post publish the book excerpts? How did we let ourselves be deceived? The Post made a good faith effort—before, during and after publication—to see if there was a U.S. government hand in the book. It approached the CIA. But no reason was found to overrule the news judgment that the book was a hot item. So the paper went ahead.

You can conclude that newspapers in the 1960s were naive, inadequately alert to the need to challenge the uses of secret power. Our plea must be: guilty as charged. Only a few of us journalists are immune to the temptations and vulnerabilities of the larger society. But which of us?