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F.B.I. Reported to Have Halted Efforts To Detect Foreign Undercover Agents

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 26—The Federal Bureau of Investigation has halted over the last 10 years most of its efforts to identify and track down undercover agents of the Soviet and other hostile intelligence services operating in this country, according to a number of well-informed sources.

The efforts, which ranged from searching for the sources of "illicit" radio transmissions to checking immigration records for traces of Cyrillic handwriting, were phased out by J. Edgar Hoover in the late 1960's and early 1970's, these sources said.

The reasons for the late F.B.I. director's actions, they said, included his reluctance to assign large numbers of agents to such efforts as the bureau's program

of opening mail of foreign agents, ended in 1966, at the expense of investigating radical domestic organizations that were then increasingly in the news.

The F.B.I. has sole responsibility for counter-intelligence activities within the United States, and one source said that the ending of such programs by Mr. Hoover had turned this country into "a happy hunting ground since 1967" for undercover intelligence operatives of every stripe.

"We've got to have them coming out of our ears," one source said of the undercover, or "illegal" agents, so-called because they enter this country with false identities in violation of the immigration laws.

The number of illegal agents placed in the United States by

Soviet and other Communist intelligence services has been estimated at as high as 200, but there are no reliable figures.

They are believed to cluster along the Eastern Seaboard, because of its high concentration of military, commercial and governmental installations, and in other areas of the country, like Seattle or San Diego, that have special intelligence interest.

The sources said that although operations like the mail and immigration checks were immensely time-consuming they occasionally returned major benefits. A Cyrillic twist to handwriting placed on a document by Kaarlo Tuomi, a Soviet agent who entered the United States illegally in 1959, was instrumental in his arrest, they

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said. The Russian language is written in the 32-character Cyrillic alphabet, many of which have distinctive characteristics not common to their English equivalents.

The Cyrillic handwriting operation was described by one source as "the best program we ever had." But another source said that many of the now-defunct programs, like spot-checking Chinese laundries, had been "worthless" to begin with and had been approved by Mr. Hoover only because "they looked good on paper and no one got hurt."

That source and others said that the National Security Agency had for some years been supplying the F.B.I. with the approximate locations of clandestine transmitters used by agents to communicate with the Soviet intelligence service (K.G.B.) center in Moscow or the overseas headquarters of other intelligence services.

The N.S.A., the source said, could only narrow the source of such coded messages down to a geographic area about 10 miles square. He said it was a complicated thing for the F.B.I. to narrow it any further, although such techniques have on occasion resulted in the discovery of an illegal transmitter.

Mr. Hoover, another source said, discontinued that program in 1971, to the "consternation" of counterespionage agents in the F.B.I.'s domestic intelligence division.

Best Security Plan

The most secure means of communication between an illegal agent and his control center, another source said, was by an apparently innocuous exchange of letters that contained coded messages or ones written in invisible ink.

The halting of the F.B.I.'s

opening and photographing of mail to and from Soviet and East European embassies and missions in the United States, from which illegal agents are often directed, has improved immeasurably the security of such communications, several sources said.

Despite gradual but continual shifts of manpower to other areas of its operations, the F.B.I., sources said, has continued to follow as closely as it can the 800 or so known agents of the Soviet K.G.B. and other hostile services posted to this country under a variety of spurious but official covers.

Unlike the smaller number of illegal agents, who in many cases adopt American names and native "histories" once inside this country, the "officials" re-

tain their own names and pass themselves off as diplomats, journalists, students or representatives of such commercial concerns as Aeroflot, the Soviet airline, or Amtorg, its trade organization.

While Soviet, Eastern European and Chinese diplomats have immunity from Federal prosecution and are simply deported upon discovery, other officials are subject to criminal charges like those brought in 1963 against Ivan Ivanov, a K.G.B. officer who had been posing as an Amtorg "chauffeur."

Those serving under official cover are watched and in many cases have limited travelling privileges within the United States. As a result, their duties are frequently restricted to attempts to recruit dissatisfied Americans as informants, to providing support for illegal operatives or to collecting publicly available information of intelligence interest.

The illegal agents are much more free to travel and develop lucrative personal relationships, and so engage in more active espionage work than their official counterparts.

Some of the illegal agents are known to the F.B.I. as "sleepers" because they are placed inside the United States to remain dormant for years before being "activated."

Zech Murder Case

Although the bulk of Soviet and Soviet-bloc activity in this country focuses on the collection of intelligence, sources said that a few members of the K.G.B.'s Department V, an assassination and terrorism unit, had been stationed in the United States over the years.

But none of the sources had any knowledge of murders of foreign nationals or others here that they could attribute to hostile intelligence agents.

Earlier this month, the Senate's Subcommittee on Internal Security released testimony by Josef Frolik, a former Czech intelligence agent who had defected to the United States, attributing the murder of a Czech woman in New York City in 1962 to the H.S.R., the Czechoslovak intelligence service.

Until Mr. Frolik's charges were made public, the woman, Vera Zizka, was presumed to have been murdered by her husband, Karel, an attache of the Czechoslovak mission to the United Nations, who committed suicide shortly after her death.

One source said that although Department V had apparently carried out two murders in Germany some years ago, it had last proposed a murder, never carried out, in this country in 1955.

That source and others said that, assuming Mr. Frolik's charges were true, the Zizka case would be the only one of its kind officially known to the F.B.I. or other intelligence agencies here.