

JFK Assassination



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After President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on 22 November 1963, the US Government briefly suspected that the Soviet Union might have perpetrated this crime. Fears of Moscow's complicity were revived in early 1964 because of a convoluted counterintelligence episode involving CIA's legendary James Angleton and KGB defector Yuri Nosenko^[1]. No case in the Agency's history was more fraught with potential for conflict. If Nosenko was found to be a dispatched agent, it would suggest that Moscow had ordered the murder of a American president--probably a casus belli for the United States. Consequently, Nosenko was detained and harshly treated for nearly four years when it appeared to CIA officials like Angleton that he might be hiding a Soviet role in the assassination. Meanwhile, Angleton's pursuit of the CIA mole whom Nosenko allegedly was protecting damaged many Agency officers' careers and tarnished the CI chief's reputation.^[2]



Intelligence History Portal



Yuri Nosenko

When news of Kennedy's assassination reached Langley, Richard Helms --then the Agency's head of operations--recalled that "[w]e all went to battle stations over the possibility that this might be a plot--and who was pulling the strings." Especially after assassin Lee Harvey Oswald's murder two days later, Agency officers could not until mid-December rule out the possibility that Oswald was a Soviet or Cuban hit man.^[2]

Suspicions of KGB complicity were revived in late January 1964 when Nosenko--a counterintelligence officer who had first been in touch with CIA in 1962--recontacted the Agency in Vienna and soon defected. Between the two meetings, Angleton and like-minded CIA officers began to doubt Nosenko's credibility, but now his startling disclosure that he had been assigned to watch Oswald during the latter's defection to the Soviet Union (from 1959 to 1962) was the main reason for CIA's suspicion of him.^[2]

Nosenko's surprise decision to defect and his news that Oswald was not a KGB asset seemed too convenient to Angleton and other Agency officials. Moreover, Nosenko contradicted the assertion of Angleton's key source on the KGB, defector Anatoly Golitsyn, that the Soviets had a mole inside CIA. Golitsyn claimed that Nosenko was a disinformation agent sent both to discredit him and to hide Moscow's hand in President Kennedy's death. DCI John McCone, Helms, and senior Agency executives decided that an extraordinary effort to elicit the truth from Nosenko was essential because, as Helms later said, "if it were shown that Oswald was acting as a Soviet agent when he shot President Kennedy, the consequences to the United States and to the world, would have been staggering." Despite being kept in austere conditions for over three years and periodically subjected to harsh interrogation (none of which Angleton ordered), Nosenko never changed his story. Nosenko was eventually released and compensated.^[2]

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Meanwhile, doubts about Nosenko energized Angleton's molehunt. If the Kremlin had gone so far as to murder an American president, Angleton reasoned, it would attempt to hide its complicity by using its hypothetical mole inside CIA to support the credibility of a false defector sent to report that Oswald had no tie to the KGB. Acting on Golitsyn's vague leads, Angleton did find a mole, but because he was not as senior or as damaging as Angleton had thought, and was no longer working for CIA, the search continued for the "primary mole" supposedly still inside Langley. Along the way, forty Agency officers were put on the suspect list and fourteen were thoroughly investigated. Although innocent, all had their careers damaged by the "security stigma."^[2]

Angleton was fired in December 1974 amidst the "Family Jewels" scandal, and as details of the Nosenko case and the molehunt became widely known inside and outside the Agency, his theories and methods fell into disrepute, and the CI Staff's resources and prestige plummeted. Not until after the "year of the spy" in 1985 would the Agency's CI capabilities begin to be restored.^[2]

References

- 1. ↑ Nosenko passed away in August 2008 [Redacted] (b)(3)
[Redacted] (b)(3)
- 2. ↑ ^{2.0 2.1 2.2 2.3 2.4 2.5} This item was contributed by the Center for the Study of Intelligence, CIA. (improved citation needed)

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