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Who Was Lee Harvey Oswald?

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The endless tangle of questions about bullets, trajectories, wounds, time sequences and inconsistent testimony that has surrounded the assassination of President John F. Kennedy for 20 years—and obsessively fascinated, if not entirely blinded, a generation of assassination buffs—probably never will be resolved. Within this morass of facts, however, there is a central actor: Lee Harvey Oswald. His rifle, which fired the fatal bullet into the president, was found in the sniper's nest. His cartridge cases were also found a few feet away from the body of a murdered policeman on the route of his flight. He was captured shortly thereafter, resisting arrest, with the loaded murder revolver in his hand.

In light of this overwhelming evidence, the issue that ought to have concerned Americans was not Oswald's technical guilt, but his dangerous liaisons abroad. Only eight weeks before the assassination, he had excited FBI and CIA interest in his activities by renewing his contacts with Cuban and Soviet KGB officials in Mexico City. However, although these foreign connections remained of great concern to the two U.S. intelligence agencies, they were considered far too sensitive to be aired publicly in the emotional aftermath of the president's slaying.

Oswald was not a "loner" in the conventional sense. Ever since handed a pamphlet about the Rosenberg prosecution at 15 years old in New York City, he had sought out affiliations with political organizations, front groups and foreign nations that opposed the policies of the U.S. When he was 16, he wrote the Socialist Party "I am a Marxist and have been studying Socialist Principles for well over fifteen months," and he requested information about joining their "Youth League." He also attempted to persuade a friend to join the local youth auxiliary of the Communist Party. He subsequently made membership inquiries to such organizations as the Socialist Workers Party, the Socialist Labor Party, the Gus Hall-Benjamin Davis Defense Committee, the Daily Worker, the Fair Play for Cuba Committee and the Communist Party, U.S.A.—correspondence that eventually brought him under surveillance by the FBI.

Compromised U.S. Security

While still in the early stages of his flirtation with political causes, Oswald joined the Marine Corps—primarily to get away

from home. In October 1959, after a two-year stint as a radar operator, Oswald ended any lingering doubts about his loyalty by becoming the first Marine to defect to the Soviet Union. In Moscow, he delivered a letter stating, "I affirm that my allegiance is to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics."

Not only did he publicly renounce his American citizenship but he told the U.S. consul that he intended to turn over to the Soviet Union all the military secrets that he had acquired while serving in the Marines, adding that he had data of "special interest" to the Russians. Since he indeed had exposure to military secrets, such as the U-2 spy plane and radar identification systems, and since he may have collected data while still on active duty, his defection had serious espionage implications. Oswald thus effectively compromised the security of all he had come in contact with in the Marines. He also, through this act, irrevocably put himself in the hands of his hosts. He was now completely dependent on the Soviets for financial support, legal status and protection.

On May 1, 1960, less than six months after Oswald's defection, a U-2 was shot down over the Soviet Union and its pilot, Francis Gary Powers, was captured. Oswald wrote his brother that he had seen Mr. Powers—a claim that was to greatly intrigue the pilot after he was returned to the U.S. During his lengthy interrogation in Moscow, Mr. Powers was confronted with a wealth of information about previous flights of his spy plane. Since his interrogators laced each successive question with new details, he became convinced that Soviet intelligence must have had a readily available and knowledgeable source.

Before disappearing into the Soviet hinterland for a year, Oswald spelled out his operational creed in a long letter to his brother. From Moscow, he wrote presciently of his willingness to commit murder for a political cause: "I want you to understand what I say now, I do not say lightly, or unknowingly, since I've been in the military. . . . In the event of war I would kill any American who put a uniform on in defense of the American Government—," and then ominously added for emphasis, "Any American." Although his letter was routinely intercepted by the CIA and microfilmed, no discernable attention was paid to the threat contained in it.

When he returned from the Soviet Union in June 1962 (with a little help from a State Department eager to demonstrate that it could win back a defector from the Sovi-

ets), Oswald, now joined by a Russian wife, retained his militant convictions.

In Dallas, where he settled, he purchased a rifle with telescopic sights and a revolver from a mail-order house under a false name. He also lectured his more liberal acquaintances on the need for violent action rather than mere words.

Gen. Edwin A. Walker, an extreme conservative, who had been active in Dallas organizing anti-Castro guerrillas, became in the spring of 1963 a particular focus of Oswald's attention. He repeatedly suggested to a German geologist, Volkmar Schmidt and other friends, that Gen. Walker should be treated like a "murderer at large." He did not stop at fierce words. For weeks, he methodically stalked Gen. Walker's movements, photographing his residence from several angles.

He then had his wife photograph him, dressed entirely in black, with his revolver strapped in a holster on his hip, his sniper's rifle in his right hand, and two newspapers—the Worker and the Militant—in his left hand. He made three copies of the photograph—one of which he inscribed, dated "5-IV-63" and sent to a Dallas acquaintance, George De Mohrenschildt. He left that same night with his rifle wrapped in a raincoat, telling his wife he was off to "target practice," but his target, Gen. Walker, was out of town. Five nights later, Oswald returned to Gen. Walker's house, and fired a shot at him that missed his head by inches, demonstrating that he had the capacity as well as the willingness to kill "Any American."

When Mr. De Mohrenschildt heard news of the Walker shooting on the radio, he figured that Oswald had probably been the rifleman. The next day, he asked Oswald whether he had taken a "pot shot" at Gen. Walker, but Oswald avoided answering. Mr. De Mohrenschildt had probably seen more of Oswald during this time than anyone else, including his wife, Marina, and had attempted to piece together what Oswald had been doing in the Soviet Union.

Only hours before he committed suicide in 1977, Mr. De Mohrenschildt explained to me that he had been asked to keep tabs on Oswald by the CIA officer in Dallas responsible for debriefing businessmen on their trips to communist countries. Since Oswald was presumed to be unfriendly, the CIA officer suggested that it would be useful to place a "friend" in Oswald's path. Mr. De Mohrenschildt agreed to talk to Oswald in hopes the CIA man might help him in future ventures. The Walker shooting, however, was more than he had bargained for; he immediately parted company with Oswald.

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