

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 5

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Espionage a fact of life at UN despite its idealistic mission

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UNITED NATIONS — There are some here who describe the United Nations as "the spy capital of the world" and others who dismiss the label, countering disdainfully that there is nothing here worth spying on.

But as a meeting place for the world's diplomats and with an extensive foreign staff of its own, the United Nations is fertile soil for intelligence operatives. The controversy over espionage in the world organization has been revived with the publication of "Breaking with Moscow" by Arkady Shevchenko, a former undersecretary general at the United Nations and the highest-ranking Soviet official to defect since World War II.

Shevchenko has created a tempest not merely with his allegations of widespread Soviet spying but by charging that the spying had been done by UN staff members, who are international civil servants.

There are more than 6000 of these Secretariat staff members, the vast majority of whom are foreigners and who present a serious challenge to US security, American officials say. This is in addition to the security problem posed by the presence of missions of the 159 member states, they add.

UN officials heatedly deny that the headquarters along the East River has become the center of international intrigue. It is acknowledged, however, that despite the instruction in the UN Charter that no employee "seek or receive instruction from any government," widespread intelligence-gathering or spying, goes on.

"The idea that the founding fathers of this place had, that of an international civil service above national problems — we just don't have," one Scandinavian ambas-

sador said. "A number of people here have close relations with their governments and missions. Is that spying or information-gathering? It's impossible to say."

UN officials have grappled with this reality since the organization was created. Senior UN officials admit that they routinely "freeze out" Soviet colleagues, for example, when important matters are being discussed. "Nobody tells them anything," he said tersely, "unless they want it" want it leaked to the Soviet government."

The notion of an independent international civil servant is undermined by the fact that Soviet staff members live in the Russian housing compound in Riverdale and are transported to and from the UN in chartered buses.

According to Shevchenko and other experienced intelligence officials, the Soviet Secretariat staff is required to inform the Soviet government of developments within the UN system, to contribute part of their salaries to the mission, to forward scientific and technical papers they acquire and to attend meetings held at the mission.

The Soviets have more than 400 employees on the UN payroll. According to US intelligence estimates, a third are considered to be employed by the KGB.

Former intelligence officials and Western diplomats also list Cuba, Nicaragua, Laos, Vietnam, Libya, Israel, Iran, Iraq and virtually the entire Soviet bloc when discussing other intelligence networks.

Two basic kinds of intelligence operations are at work here.

In the first, a variety of countries cultivate and recruit as spies the hundreds of young diplomats who work here. In years to come, intelligence officials point out, they will return to their countries and assume more influential posts.

That's what happened with Arne Treholt. Treholt, a Norwegian who eventually rose to the

rank of deputy minister, served as a specialist in his mission on economic and social matters. Arrested in Oslo, he will stand trial in the next few weeks — charged with espionage. One of his contacts was a colleague at the Soviet Embassy in New York.

In the second type, intelligence is gathered by UN staffers for their own governments. As international civil servants, they do not operate under the same constraints as diplomats. They have greater access to public records and complete freedom to travel in the United States. And they can pursue contacts in a variety of fields — communications, banking, electronics.

In addition, the members of the Secretariat staff monitor the pulse of diplomatic life within the world body, reporting on a range of subjects from peacekeeping to personnel changes.

Many diplomats interviewed were quick to charge that allegations of spying were grossly exaggerated and designed to malign and disparage the United Nations. One Arab diplomat said the charges of spying were "romantic and sensational."

"The UN system is very transparent," one Scandinavian ambassador said. "I have difficulty in seeing the value of these kinds of secrets. I'm not in the least worried about the possible recruitment of my staff."

But some were shaken by the Treholt affair. One Western ambassador said his staff is now being carefully briefed on intelligence issues as "part of their training back home. Our procedures have been reviewed and security routines changed.

"But," he said ruefully, "you can never be 100 percent secure."