

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1 Sec 1CHICAGO TRIBUNE
10 November 1985

Soviet spy's flip-flop leaves CIA red-faced

By Raymond Coffey
Chicago Tribune

WASHINGTON—No one here—starting with President Reagan—seems to know for sure whether Soviet spymaster Vitaly Yurchenko, who flew home to Moscow last week, was a bona fide defector or a KGB plant.

But the whole world knows the Central Intelligence Agency blew another big case, to the considerable embarrassment of the Reagan administration as it prepares for the Geneva summit with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

And whatever else his future holds, Yurchenko's career in the top echelon of the KGB is effectively finished; even if he was a plant, his Soviet superiors can never really trust him again.

Those appear to be, following Yurchenko's stunningly dramatic

redefection announcement last Monday, the only real consensus judgments that have emerged among administration officials, people on Capitol Hill most familiar with the case and members of what is called the "intelligence community."

The CIA, mainly through its loyalist alumni with which Washington is aswarm, mounted a major campaign last week to persuade Congress, the media and the public that Yurchenko, who had been identified as the No. 5 man in the KGB apparatus and touted as one of the prize catches ever landed by the CIA, was a genuine and valuable defector.

In the last few days some critics in the administration and Congress have taken the CIA to task for its handling of the affair and have

suggested that Yurchenko was not such a prize catch after all.

Friday night, in an unusual step apparently intended to rebut those critics, the CIA made public a three-page "fact sheet" tracing Yurchenko's career from high school in 1948 to his last assignment, supervising KGB agents in the U.S. and Canada. The information presumably came from CIA interrogation of the man.

But doubts persist, especially among experts in Congress, and even President Reagan seemed unpersuaded by the CIA argument.

In an interview with news agency reporters last week the President gave weight to the theory that Yurchenko was a plant all along and that the KGB had hoodwinked the CIA.

Reagan suggested the Yurchenko case, plus two other recent incidents involving Soviet defectors who changed their minds, might constitute a "deliberate ploy" aimed at affecting the political climate at his Nov. 19-20 summit with Gorbachev.

Reagan also disputed the relentlessly publicized claims of CIA Director William Casey and his operatives that Yurchenko had supplied the U.S. with extremely valuable intelligence during his three months in the care of the CIA.

"The information that he provided was not anything new or sensational," Reagan said, adding that most of it was already known to the CIA.

While Yurchenko's motives and authenticity remained a puzzle, even some of the CIA's staunchest friends in official Washington admitted to chagrin and embarrassment over the handling of the Yurchenko case.

A member of Congress who serves on one of the intelligence oversight committees and is generally an active defender of the CIA said he wondered whether "they're a bunch of Keystone Kops" or "broken-down house dicks."

Sen. David Durenberger [R., Minn.], chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, said he believed Yurchenko was a genuine defector and the CIA had not been lax in allowing him to get up from dinner with a CIA agent and stroll over to the nearby Soviet Embassy residential compound last Saturday night.

But Senators Patrick Leahy [D., Vt.], Sam Nunn [D., Ga.] and William Cohen [R., Me.], who also serve on the committee and received extensive briefings on Yurchenko from the time he defected in Rome last summer, all ex-

pressed suspicions that Yurchenko was a double agent from the beginning, planted on the CIA by the KGB.

Either he was a legitimate defector who created "significant embarrassment" to the U.S. by being allowed to walk away from his CIA handlers and redefect, Leahy said, or "you have a double agent who was planted on the United States and then you have far more than a significant embarrassment, you have an out-and-out calamity."

As in any good spy story, the Yurchenko case involves almost countless twists and turns and speculations. Inevitably also, there is the romantic angle.

In the early days after he allegedly came in from the cold, Yurchenko, 49, who wears a walrus mustache, was being touted in CIA-inspired leaks as not only an extremely high-ranking KGB officer—the man in charge of all Soviet espionage in the U.S. and Canada—but as a new and different kind of defector.

He had defected, the stories went, not for love or money or selfish interest but for ideological reasons: He was fed up with communism and the Soviet system.

But after his redefection, the assiduously spread leaks from the intelligence community took a different turn and focused instead on Yurchenko's alleged jilting in a love affair with the wife of a Soviet diplomat stationed in Canada.

He had intended to defect and have her join him in an affluent new life in America supported by a fat CIA payoff. By Yurchenko's account, the CIA had offered him \$1 million plus \$62,500 a year, with annual Social Security-style cost-of-living adjustments. They were also willing to throw in \$48,000 worth of furniture from the CIA "safe house" in Virginia where the CIA had stashed him, Yurchenko said.

Now, came the word from CIA supporters, Yurchenko's motives weren't ideological at all. Instead, as one retired CIA official put it, "the chick chickened out," he got "cold feet" and changed his mind.

Yurchenko, in fact, did make a recent trip to Canada, obviously with the approval of his CIA handlers, according to reports from Canada. But Canadian officials ruled out any link between Yurchenko and the suicide in Toronto last week of the 48-year-

old wife of a Soviet trade representative.

Those who support the CIA argument that Yurchenko originally was a legitimate defector rely mainly on reports that he identified for the CIA at least four sometime operatives in U.S. agencies who were, in fact, Soviet agents.

The most celebrated case is that of Edward Lee Howard, a former CIA employee who allegedly tipped the Soviets off and enabled them to nail A.G. Tolkachev, a Soviet aeronautical electronics expert who had been supplying information to the CIA.

Those who question the genuineness of Yurchenko's defection note that Howard had been fired by the CIA before Yurchenko defected and therefore was of no further value to the Soviets anyway.

Moreover, in another example of what critics regard as incompetence on the part of the CIA, Howard vanished from his New Mexico home before the FBI was able to arrest him and has now fled the country. The CIA reportedly failed to tell the FBI of its doubts about Howard.

In the Yurchenko redefection, the CIA apparently did not notify the FBI or anyone else that he had disappeared. The White House, the Justice Department and apparently the CIA itself were taken totally by surprise Monday when Yurchenko turned up at a rare press conference in the Soviet Embassy and claimed he never had defected—that he had been kidnaped, drugged and tortured by U.S. agents.

What has been most baffling to most people about the CIA handling of the case is that Yurchenko, dining with a single CIA handler at the Au Pied de Cochon restaurant in the Georgetown section of Washington last Saturday, was allowed to get up and leave with no questions asked and no effort made to trail him.

CIA and other intelligence sources contend, however, that any defector is free to come and go as he pleases, and there is no legal basis for restraining one.

They point out also that the CIA got in hot water about 20 years ago because, out of concern that Yuri Nosenko, another alleged KGB defector, was a plant, the CIA kept him locked in isolation from 1964 to 1968. The intramural battle over whether Nosenko was or was not genuine raged for years and culminated in a still controversial housecleaning of top officials in the CIA's counterintelligence section.

The U.S. flatly denied Yurchenko's claims of having been kidnaped, drugged and mistreated, and those denials are almost unanimously accepted here.

A retired top-ranking CIA official

who personally dealt with "hundreds of defectors" said that sort of treatment is not the way the agency operates. Taking Yurchenko out to dinner and allowing him "some elbow room" fits the standard operating procedure, he said.

But, he acknowledged, "I guess you'd have to say the security net was not adequate" in this case.

The principal negative in the Yurchenko case, the former CIA official insisted, was that the U.S. suffered a "significant loss" because the three months or so Yurchenko was in CIA hands was only enough time to "skim the cream" off all the intelligence that might have been pried out of him.

"He's the kind of guy you'd like to talk with for at least another year," he said.

Beyond the embarrassment to the CIA, intelligence sources said the Soviet Union now can be expected to make the most of the propaganda opportunity presented by the Yurchenko case, especially in connection with the summit.

Reagan has made it plain he intends to confront Gorbachev on the issue of Soviet infringements on human rights. The Soviets already are trumpeting around the world Yurchenko's allegations and the Soviet media are describing his alleged treatment as another example of U.S. "state terrorism."

The Soviets also will profit from the Yurchenko case, a former CIA official said, by using it both to discourage future defections and to

encourage other defectors to redefect.

"They [the Soviets] were really hemorrhaging there for a while" with a large number of important defections, including the KGB station chief in London, the former CIA official noted.

But now, he said, "they'll be using Yurchenko as an example: 'See what happens to you when you deal with these guys?' That's a pretty powerful deterrent."

The Soviet Union so far is treating Yurchenko as something of a hero for his alleged escape from the CIA. But no one in the intelligence community here seems to think that will last for long.

"Even if he was a plant," the former CIA official said, "they can never really trust him again. They can never be sure that we didn't 'turn' him while we had him."

"They'll keep him around for a while in case anybody asks whatever happened to Yurchenko," he said, "but in a year or two we'll hear he got killed in a car accident or something."

Despite the criticisms of the CIA performance on the case, Director Casey, 72, apparently will have a kinder fate.

The Senate Intelligence Committee is demanding answers on how it all happened, and a member of the House committee said Casey "is a very smart guy, but as captain of the ship he's got to take the rap."

A senior White House aide late last week also made clear that the President is furious about the embarrassment. But Reagan apparently has no intention of calling Casey, his former campaign manager, on the carpet or taking any direct action in the case.