

WASHINGTON POST
22 MARCH 1975

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CIA Read Mail to Russia

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The Central Intelligence Agency abandoned an illegal mail-interception program that lasted almost 20 years only in the face of an ultimatum from the chief U.S. postal inspector, according to Congressional testimony made public yesterday.

Chief postal inspector William J. Cotter said he made repeated efforts to have the CIA drop the project following his appointment to the U.S. Postal Service in 1969, but was frustrated at first, apparently because of the intercession of then-CIA Director Richard Helms.

CIA Director William E. Colby, who has publicly described the project as illegal, has indicated that the agency topped it of its own accord in February of 1973.

Cotter, however, testifying before a House Judiciary subcommittee, said it was halted only after he gave the CIA deadline of Feb. 15, 1973, to "get superior approval for this thing or discontinue it." He said CIA officials asked for an extension, but Cotter held firm and "they suspended it."

According to other testimony before the subcommittee, the program involved the surreptitious opening and reproduction of thousands of letters of first-class mail written by Americans over a 20-year period.

The CIA has described the project — which is apparently under investigation by the Justice Department for possible criminal violations — only in guarded, general terms. Cotter's testimony, given Tuesday in closed session before the House subcommittee, provided the first detailed history of its inception in 1953.

Subcommittee Chairman Robert W. Kastenmeier (D-Wis.) said the hearing had been closed to the public at the behest of Deputy Attorney General Laurence H. Silberman who "raised a number of questions including the issue of national security." Kastenmeier, however, said he wanted no part in "withholding information from the public that is rightfully of public concern."

He called the project a "direct violation of the letter and spirit of the law" prohibiting the opening of first-class mail without a search warrant.

A CIA agent for 18 years himself, Cotter said the program was initiated in 1953 as a "survey" of mail between the United States and the Soviet Union but apparently with the understanding on the part of postal officials that it was to

be simply "information" which means monitoring information on the envelopes, such as the names of the senders and addressees.

According to Cotter, who recently inspected the CIA's files on the project, CIA then-Director Allen W. Dulles briefed Postmaster General Arthur W. Summerfield about the plans and evidently got his approval.

"A couple of years later, however," Cotter said, "there was an indication, perhaps after 1955, they went one step further — the CIA people — without the concurrence of the postal people, and surreptitiously appropriated some letters, opened the letters."

Cotter said he knew of the mail openings even then since he was the assistant agent in charge of the CIA's New York field office at the time. He said it was "a little operation" inside the post office at Kennedy International Airport, but that it did involve "a significant volume of mail . . . sacks of mail" between the United States and the Soviet Union.

"I'm amazed, 20 years it goes on, that it didn't hit the fan somehow," Cotter testified.

Normally, postal employees themselves conduct such operations, but in this case, Cotter said, "it was different . . . The employees of the CIA were authorized to actually shuffle mail, and sort mail, and get it in the categories they wanted to get it, what have you . . . obviously they did surreptitiously slip some of these letters in their pockets, or something like that, removed it from the premises, opened it, took pictures of it, and get it back in the mainstream the next day."

Another former CIA official, Mel Crain, once a deputy operations research chief in the CIA's clandestine services told the subcommittee yesterday that he was told "all the mail going to the USSR — because that is what we were interested in — was opened."

Crain said he was first introduced to that project in 1958 at a hush-hush CIA briefing where the briefing officer — whose name Crain could not recall — casually remarked that "of course, this is unconstitutional and illegal, but . . . we're in a cold war, you know."

"In current jargon, this simply 'blew my mind,'" Crain said, declaring that he quit the CIA in 1959 at least partly because of the program. He said the Soviet Russia division where he worked got copies of at least six intercepted letters a day.

Crain said he was also told that mail to other Iron Curtain countries was intercepted and that a post office in New Orleans as well as one in New York were the focal points. Colby has indicated that only one U.S. city was involved.

Cotter said he was aware of the New York projects when he moved from the CIA in 1969 to become chief postal inspector. He said "there wasn't any record of the project" at the Postal Service, but "I wanted to do something about it. I was pushing to get rid of the project."

Eventually, in 1971, Cotter said, he told CIA Director Helms that he wished the agency "would either get exceedingly high approval for this project" or drop it. He said Helms told him, "All right, I'll take care of it."

Three days later, Cotter testified, then Postmaster General Winton Blount called him in and told him, "I had a meeting with your former boss and 'carry on with the project.'" Cotter said he understood that Attorney General John N. Mitchell also had been briefed at the time and "thought, I understand, the project was fine."

After Blount left the Postal Service, Cotter said he renewed his efforts, especially in the wake of the Watergate burglary, but this time without even telling his new boss, Postmaster General E. T. Klassen.

Finally, Cotter said, he gave the CIA a Feb. 15, 1973, deadline to get higher approval for the program or drop it. He said CIA officials came back to him on Feb. 13, 1973, for an extension "while they worked something else out," but he told them to suspend the project.

"They suspended it and that's the end of the project," he said.

Cotter said he did not know just how high in the government awareness of the mail interception extended, but "I personally feel" that "past presidents were aware of this. I personally feel" that "the National Security Council

was involved in this type of thing, but that's just feeling. The files that were made available to me by CIA didn't go above that level."

Cotter said incoming mail from China was also intercepted by the CIA in San Francisco on sporadic occasions between 1969 and 1971. He said "there may have been some other places" involved, too. "There was a period of time when they had access to some Cuban mail," he said.

About two weeks ago, Cotter added, Postmaster General Ben F. Bailar wrote Colby a letter asking for the CIA director's "personal assurance that there are no more of these types of operations presently going on, planned, or ever to be undertaken." Cotter said he was not aware of any reply from Colby so far.

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