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KGB defector wants to go home again

Was the defection set up to ruin Reagan's agenda?

By Bill Gertz
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Intelligence experts believe Soviet KGB official Vitaly Yurchenko's announcement yesterday that his defection was coerced was a deliberate act designed to affect the agenda of the upcoming summit meeting between President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

The incident also has brought into question the competency of the Central Intelligence Agency to identify and handle defectors and is likely to spur administration reforms of agency procedures in handling defectors.

Some analysts said Mr. Yurchenko's charges of "torture" and forced drug use to coerce secret information has embarrassed the intelligence community two weeks before the Geneva summit.

Georgetown University professor Roy Godson, an expert on Soviet intelligence operations, said he believed Mr. Yurchenko could have been a false defector from the beginning who was sent by the Soviets "to discredit President Reagan and prevent him from using human rights at the summit."

Mr. Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev will meet for a summit in Geneva Nov. 19-20.

They also said the charges of torture and drug use could scare other would-be defectors, who might fear harsh treatment in the United States as a result of the Yurchenko claims.

George Carver, a former CIA official who is a senior analyst with Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies, said in an interview that it appeared the CIA had mishandled Mr. Yurchenko's case.

"If something like this happens, obviously the handling of it was something less than optimal," he said. "Either the guy was misjudged or not kept in the proper environment."

He dismissed Mr. Yurchenko's allegations that the CIA used drugs to obtain secrets as a "story that ... was clearly made up out of whole cloth."

"Anybody [at the CIA] who would have suggested that would have been fired," Mr. Carver said.

Mr. Carver also said Mr. Yurchenko could have planned his false defection since the beginning on July 28 in Rome, or he may have suffered a "psychic sea change" and decided to return to the Soviet Union.

He also speculated that the Soviets may have communicated in some way with Mr. Yurchenko and succeeded in convincing him to return to the Soviet Union.

Mr. Yurchenko apparently fooled the highest levels of the CIA. Sources close to Wyoming Republican Sen. Malcolm Wallop, a critic of current CIA counterintelligence policies, said Deputy CIA Director John McMahon told the senator as late as Thursday, "I'll stake my career on his [Yurchenko's] bonafides."

CIA Director William Casey said privately that Mr. Yurchenko was one of the most valuable defectors to come to the West and compared the former No. 5 man in the KGB to two other Soviet bloc defectors — Britain's top KGB spy, Oleg Gordievski, and East German diplomat, Martin Winkler. Mr. Gordievski is in England. Mr. Winkler defected from the East German Embassy in Argentina and fled to West Germany.

Last month, a CIA official said the agency was convinced that Mr. Yurchenko was a legitimate defector because he exhibited "no abnormalities," such as drinking or mental problems, that have affected the credibility of past Soviet defectors.

The official said Mr. Yurchenko had identified two former CIA officials as suspected Soviet spies, but defended the agency against a controversy over Soviet penetrations saying, "There were no moles and there are no moles in the CIA."

The official said Mr. Yurchenko had set only one condition on his defection: that intelligence agencies would not provide any public confirmation of his departure since such a revelation would jeopardize his family in Moscow.

Angelo Codevilla, a former aide of Sen. Wallop who is now an intelligence expert with the Hoover Institution, said the CIA's handling of Mr. Yurchenko is evidence that U.S. intelligence agencies "lack the requisite ability and competence to run the [counterintelligence] business."

Mr. Codevilla said the Yurchenko case could have been prevented if the CIA had relied less on polygraph tests to determine Mr. Yurchenko's sincerity and more on vigilant cross-checking of information with "unexpected" intelligence — information from channels the Soviets did not know the United States was using to collect data.

He said CIA officials involved in handling Mr. Yurchenko should resign over the failure of counterintelligence.

Georgetown's Mr. Godson, in an interview, also said Mr. Yurchenko "apparently gave information that has been described as 'chicken

feed'" to establish his credibility with U.S. intelligence.

"His performance today was so strong it seemed to have been rehearsed," Mr. Godson said. "He didn't look like a man who had been drugged."

Mr. Godson also suggested that Mr. Yurchenko may have suffered "post-partum depression" in that what he had expected in the West failed to materialize.

He mentioned the case of Soviet editor Oleg Bitov who Mr. Godson said had told him that he had defected voluntarily. Later Mr. Bitov returned to Moscow and charged that he had been drugged and kidnapped.

Andrew Nagorski, a former Moscow correspondent for Newsweek, said the Yurchenko affair was designed to "clear the decks" of discussions about Soviet human rights violations and support for international terrorism at the summit. He said Moscow orchestrated the dramatic

"escape" of Mr. Yurchenko to prevent Mr. Reagan from going ahead with U.S. plans to raise human rights and Soviet-backed terrorism and thereby limit the summit agenda to arms control and specifically talks on curbing U.S. strategic defense research.

One intelligence expert, speaking on background, described Mr. Yurchenko's ploy as a "deliberate provocation of great magnitude." Mr. Yurchenko managed to make fools out of the entire U.S. intelligence community, including the Senate and House intelligence committees which failed to question the CIA about Mr. Yurchenko's legitimacy, the expert said.

The expert said he believed the Soviets timed the Yurchenko press conference to coincide with meetings in Moscow between Secretary of State George Shultz and Soviet officials, scheduled in Moscow only hours after the embassy news conference here.