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Moscow says ex-CIA agent given asylum

American accused of spying vanished from home last fall

From Wire Reports

MOSCOW — A fugitive former CIA agent suspected of passing damaging secrets that may have led to the execution of a top spy working for the United States in Moscow has defected to the Soviet Union, Tass reported yesterday.

Tass, the official Soviet news agency, said the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, or parliament, guided by "humanitarian considerations," had granted a request for asylum from 34-year-old Edward Lee Howard.

"He has stated that the motive for his request is that he has to hide from U.S. secret services which persecute him without foundation," Tass said.

No further details were immediately available, and the U.S. Embassy said: "If Howard has anything to say, he can say it for himself."

Defections to the Soviet Union are comparatively rare. British spies Kim Philby, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean defected to the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1960, Bernon Mitchell and William Martin, code breakers with the National Security Agency, also switched sides and fled to Moscow.

Mr. Howard's defection — the first by a CIA agent — was reported the same day that two Soviet high-wire artists, a husband and wife, defected to the United States after fleeing the Moscow Circus while it toured Argentina.

The Soviet government newspaper *Izvestia* published a brief announcement of Mr. Howard's defection on its back page. It did not say Mr. Howard was accused of spying and described him only as "a U.S. citizen [and] a former CIA officer." The statement did not say when Mr. Howard entered the Soviet Union.

Washington, CIA spokeswoman Kathy Pherson said she could not confirm or deny *Izvestia's* report. Assistant FBI Director William Baker said, "We certainly give a lot of credence to the Soviets' public remarks. We have no reason to believe they are untrue."

U.S. law enforcement authorities last year accused Mr. Howard of passing highly sensitive intelligence data to the Soviet Union that might have led to the arrest of some intelligence agents working for the Americans in Moscow and to the execution of at least one.

Sources said Mr. Howard had worked for the CIA's clandestine service from 1981 to 1983 and may have provided details on how the United States gathered sensitive intelligence information from the Soviet Union.

Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, vice chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, said yesterday that Mr. Howard had done "serious damage" to the U.S. intelligence effort in the Soviet Union.

Speaking to reporters in the Capitol, Mr. Leahy, D-Vt., said: "Whenever the KGB [Soviet spy agency] has had someone defect to the United States, it has caused damage to the Soviet Union, so it's only logical to assume that when we have a defector, it damages the United States."

The CIA fired Mr. Howard in 1983 for misconduct, and he apparently began selling sensitive information to Soviet agents, the sources said. His motives appeared to be money and a desire for revenge for his dismissal, they said.

On leaving the CIA, Mr. Howard moved to New Mexico and took a low-paying job as an economic analyst with the state legislature there.

After he came under suspicion, he was followed and watched by FBI agents but managed to slip away from his home in Santa Fe one night last September and disappeared.

Acquaintances of Mr. Howard said yesterday they were not surprised to learn he had sought asylum in the Soviet Union.

"My first thought was, he was offered asylum," said Kate Gallegos, a family friend. She wondered whether Mr. Howard's wife, Mary, would be able to meet with him.

Authorities suspect Mrs. Howard knew of the alleged sale of CIA secrets to the Soviet Union and helped her husband escape. She moved away May 31, apparently to Minnesota, where her family lives.

Philip Baca, the executive director of the New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee, who found Mr. Howard's letter of resignation on his desk Sept. 23, said he was not sur-

prised to learn of Mr. Howard's apparent defection.

"I haven't been surprised from the beginning, because I had been interviewed by the FBI," said Mr. Baca. "I feel sorry for the family."

U.S. intelligence sources said Mr. Howard had been identified as a Kremlin spy by Soviet defector Vitaly Yurchenko, a KGB officer who requested sanctuary in the West last year but then re-defected to the Soviet Union. Mr. Yurchenko said he had been abducted by CIA agents and had never defected at all.

The *Los Angeles Times* quoted informed sources last month as saying a classified report sent to President Reagan had harshly criticized the CIA and FBI for "mishandling" the case of Mr. Howard.

The paper said the report by the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board singled out the top CIA spymaster's office for overlooking repeated blunders in Mr. Howard's hiring, screening and eventual dismissal.

It said Mr. Howard's troubles went undetected until shortly before he was to be sent to Moscow, where he reportedly was to become a "case officer" for one of the CIA's most valuable informants.

Although the CIA canceled the Moscow duty, the *Los Angeles Times* quoted the report as saying both the agency and the FBI later failed to ensure that the disillusioned spy did not sell secrets.