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U.S. Once Felt It Had a Trophy in K.G.B. Man

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Nov. 5 — To American intelligence officials, Vitaly Yurchenko's defection had seemed an extraordinary coup, a signal that the tide in the ideological war turning in favor of the United States.

Just last week, officials were calling Mr. Yurchenko a new breed of defector who left because he was disillusioned with Communism, not because he was in trouble or in debt.

Before his redefection, a White House official, speaking of Mr. Yurchenko and other recent defectors, said: "It certainly has caught the attention of senior people in Government, the difference between these cases and the ones of the past."

But today, officials at the Central Intelligence Agency said they were stunned and perplexed.

"We just don't know what happened," an official said.

The prevailing view seemed to be that Mr. Yurchenko was a genuine defector who had changed his mind. But some members of Congress, briefed on the situation, said they believed Mr. Yurchenko had been send here by the K.G.B., the Soviet intelligence agency.

As Government officials try to answer the unanswered questions, they say the incident has added another reversal to what has been a turbulent year in the intelligence business.

It is difficult to know which side is winning the espionage war. An intelligence official said the redefection "is a scoop" for the Russians.

"It is sensational," he added. "But in the long run, it probably won't be that important."

The original defection of Mr. Yurchenko and of other Soviet intelligence officers, including Oleg Gordiyevsky, who was the K.G.B. station chief in London, had led to a striking change in attitude among American officials.

Through the summer, the prevailing mood had been gloom after the disclosures about the Walker family spy ring, the latest and largest in a series of damaging espionage cases. But that turned to surprise and satisfaction over the Soviet defections.

Not only were Mr. Yurchenko and Mr. Gordiyevsky senior intelligence officers, but information from their debriefings indicated they were unlike previous defectors.

"These guys are 'the new Soviet man,'" an official said last week. "They are able, capable, privileged men who were doing very well in the Soviet system. Both were colonels up for promotion to flag rank."

Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, the New York Democrat who was vice chairman of the Senate Select Intelligence Committee until early this year, said before Mr. Yurchenko redefected: "These are the ones who are given the nice homes, the fake Persian rugs, free vodka and their own Volga."

Disillusionment a Factor

Intelligence officials found that striking, they said. But even more important, they said, the two men, particularly Mr. Yurchenko, were telling interrogators that they had left the Soviet Union largely for ideological reasons.

"It is disillusionment," Senator Dave Durenberger, chairman of the Senate Select Committee, said recently. "They have come to the conclusion that their system just does not work. This is specific information from the debriefings."

About the same time, a White House official said of the defectors:

"They have not come out speaking of the broad struggles of men and character, of communism versus democracy. They are saying their system is screwed up, corrupted. They are cynical."

Mr. Gordiyevsky defected to Britain in August, and said disillusionment was part of the motiviation, Senator Durenberger said. Mr. Gordiyevsky's views apparently have not changed.

With Mr. Yurchenko, "disillusionment was clearly the dominant factor," according to interrogators, Senator Durenberger said.

Officials said previous defectors had not mentioned disillusionment.

"I have never seen a political defector in 30 years," Harry Rositzke, a former C.I.A. officer, said today.

Richard M. Helms, who served in the C.I.A. from 1947 to 1973, when he resigned as director of Central Intelligence, said: "During my time in the agency, I don't recall a single defector who came here for ideological reasons. It was always girlfriends or money problems, or they got in trouble for one reason or another."

The Americans drew conclusions from Mr. Yurchenko's statements.

Two weeks ago, William E. Colby who was Director of Central Intelligence during the middle 1970's, said:

"If we had had defections of three senior C.I.A. officers to the Soviet Union, this country would be in an uproar. What this seems to signal is a change in appeal, from the the 50's and 60's, when Westerners found appeal in their society, to a time when they are finding appeal in ours."

Colby Sees a Change of Heart

Today Mr. Colby said he was not sure the redefection changed that conclusion. He said it was possible that Mr. Yurchenko had been planted to confuse American intelligence.

Mr. Colby said he believed Mr. Yurchenko "was probably legitimate" and "went through the psychological trauma" that many defectors undergo, "separating themselves from their family and their country."

If Mr. Yurchenko was lying all along, a White House official said, "he was very clever."

"His responses were very sophisticated and reasonable," the official said, referring to the debriefings.

Another intelligence source, representing an opposing view, said he believed Mr. Yurchenko had been lying from the start.

"The ideological business is nonsense," he said. "He came here because he had a girlfriend."

After defecting, officials said, Mr. Yurchenko visited a woman in Canada with whom he had been involved while stationed at the Soviet Embassy here from 1975 to 1980. But she sent him away, the Americans said.

Mr. Yurchenko and Mr. Gordiyevsky were only the best known of several recent defectors. Sergei Bokhan, deputy director of Soviet military intelligence in Athens, defected in May. Senator Durenberger said there had been other defections that had not been disclosed.

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