

APPROVED FOR RELEASE 1994
CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM
18 SEPT 95

TITLE: What To Do With Defectors

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VOLUME: 5 ISSUE: Fall YEAR: 1961

STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE



A collection of articles on the historical, operational, doctrinal, and theoretical aspects of intelligence.

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Guidelines for the reception and initial handling of important deserters from the Soviet Bloc.

WHAT TO DO WITH DEFECTORS¹

John Ankerbrand

Among the several modes of intelligence collection, the exploitation of deserters, by definition sources of especial interest to intelligence for either operational or analytic purposes, is unique in its peculiarities. Although the handling of a defector is simplified by the fact that he, unlike an operating agent, cannot regain access to his former sources of information, it is greatly complicated by our acceptance of responsibility for his creature comforts, his welfare, and his ultimate disposal. Some of the problems intrinsic in defector handling and the prevailing characteristics of defector personality call for continuous, attentive, and understanding but cautious treatment.

From the defector's point of view, he has taken a desperate plunge in giving up a familiar world in exchange for one of which he knows little or nothing. He has lost all that heretofore comprised his life, gave him a sense of values, and constituted his standards of judgment. If he was a Communist (and former Communists are usually the most valuable deserters), he has also lost his ideals, his "religion," his life purpose. He is often stunned, and the officers handling him may have difficulty getting through to him or understanding what he tries to tell them.

From the operational point of view, handling problems are increased by the fact that overt as well as covert segments of the intelligence community are inevitably involved. The defector, to be sure, is not truly a clandestine source. Even

¹ An earlier article, Stanley B. Farndon's "The Interrogation of Defectors," *Studies* IV 3, p. 9 ff., described their handling at a center such as the one in Germany established exclusively for that purpose. This paper treats parallel problems and procedures in the setting of an ordinary field station, to which the early phases of defector exploitation often fall.

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if his defection has not been publicized (as it often is not if he was an intelligence or security service officer), opposition services can inventory their intelligence losses by the mere fact of his absence. They can usually determine fairly quickly if the vanished person is alive or dead, and they are often in a position to estimate reasonably well his whereabouts. Nevertheless it is usually desirable to employ clandestine tradecraft in the reception, exploitation, and protection of a defector.

Reception of the Defector

There are some clearly established requirements for procedure in the reception of a defector who declares himself at an official installation; they are found in the Inter-Agency Defector Committee Operating Instructions under IDCOP 58/1. A CIA officer is to interview or direct the interviewing of the defector and take custody of his passport. The defector's basic biographic information should be taken down on the first visit, and a complete description of him made, with photographs if possible. His local address and telephone number should be recorded, and security precautions arranged.

He is to be debriefed about his defection, a most important step, particularly as an aid in later establishing his bona fides. Any promises or seeming commitments to remove his family or other dependents from a denied area should be carefully avoided. His apparent fields and depth of knowledge and his "general level of intelligence and potential operational value" are to be appraised. Most urgently in this respect it must be ascertained whether he may possess perishable or critical intelligence information, especially in the early-warning category, or operational leads to other potential defectors or recruits. Last, but of much importance, he must sign a handwritten statement in his own language that he freely and voluntarily seeks asylum in our country.

On the basis of its initial assessment the field station must decide whether to recommend that the host country be notified of the defection. It must also, if it is to handle the defector itself, set up its plans for probing his bona fides and for exploring his knowledge or operational potential. In arriving at this assessment, one of the first questions facing intelligence

personnel who find themselves suddenly in a defector's receiving line is that of his motivation in defecting.

*Motives of Defection*²

Was his act induced by an intelligence service, was it promoted by foreign friends without intelligence connections, or is he a "walk-in" who made his decision for reasons of his own; and what were these reasons? The motives for defection are subjective, to a certain extent evanescent, and liable to re-interpretation, modification, and even reversal; but they are not therefore the less important. They are determinants of the defector's attitude and the degree to which he will cooperate with us, as well as of his potential for redefection.

If his defection has been induced (very few of these), and for truly ideological reasons (fewer yet), the reception problems are minimal. If he is a walk-in (as most likely), the ordinary routine of the field station can be utterly disrupted, sometimes for protracted periods. These walk-in defectors that take us by surprise and divert and tie down our manpower often turn out to be individuals previously regarded as hard-core opponents, Party wheelhorses, or other diehard anti-Westerners. The assessment of their motives, or perhaps it would be clearer to say assessment of the plausibility of their ostensible motives, therefore becomes one of our first tasks. It is seldom an easy one, because the defector often tells only a part of the truth.

Most defectors start out by saying that they bolted for political, *i.e.*, ideological reasons, but the rare defector with true ideological motivation is likely to be less vocal about it than those who use it to veil their real reasons. One of the least vocal was a young Polish army officer-interpreter who defected at Panmunjon toward the close of the Korean hostilities. He presented from the outset no handling problems, and the handling officers were never able to discern any personal troubles that might have caused or precipitated his defection. He had simply not liked the governmental system in Poland, and this was his first opportunity abroad to slip out from under it.

² See also on this subject John Debevoise' "Soviet Defector Motivation" and Delmege Trimble's "Defector Disposal (US)" in *Studies* II 4, p. 33 ff.

Transported overtly to the United States and used briefly for intelligence and propaganda purposes, he was soon settled in a midland community, of which he has now become a respected citizen.

Thus, with all its regimentation, the Communist system is not without individualists, independent thinkers, and rebels who if they get the chance may turn their backs on Communism and walk out. But most defections occur for other reasons—those of the subordinate who has a fight with his boss, of the man in trouble for breaking rules and regulations, of the incurable malcontent, of the psychotically disturbed. These are not lacking in any society, and the Communists have their fair share. In many defectors the motivation is dual—ideological in background but personal in precipitation.

Our intelligence officers abroad are thus faced with the need to make prompt but well-considered judgments when a walk-in appears, declares that he is seeking political asylum, and plops himself down in a chancery reception room until something is done about his situation. Field stations encountering their first walk-in tend to be incautious in their hasty appraisal of the authenticity of the defector's story. One field station, in its eagerness to deliver its first achievement of this kind, was unfortunate enough to accept a Soviet diplomatic deserter whom experienced officers could have pegged in a few hours' interviewing as mentally unbalanced.

A less extreme and more typical psychiatric case was that of a Soviet journalist who walked in with the usual ideological story. His physical act in deserting his post had been accompanied, however, we later determined, by sweeping mental reservations and evasions. He would not, for example, divulge "Soviet classified information" to us. The real reasons for his apostasy proved to be a disagreement with his superior, a characteristic disputatiousness, his marital problems, and the strong attraction of the material advantages of the West. He later reversed himself and, in accordance with our policies, was returned to the custody of Soviet officials.

On the psychiatric borderline stands the case of a medium-ranking officer of the Soviet State Security service, the civilian KGB, who defected "for political reasons." Although cooperative from the moment of our first contact with him, he was

eventually found to be in reality a refugee from himself. He could not tolerate incompetence in superiors or personality differences with them; he had resented the authority assumed by the Soviet diplomatic mission chief's wife; he had not been informed by his government that his mother had died; he had made a bad first marriage years before in Moscow. He was, in effect, an unhappy man who had come to believe that his only chance for happiness lay in a complete change of scene. By defecting he got the change of scene; whether he found happiness remains an open question.

A clinical psychologist and trained intelligence officer, after working closely with this man and another much like him, came to the conclusion that the usual defector is a perennial malcontent, one who had rebelled at most constrictions of the environment he had known and would have done the same in other environments, and that the man who defects once may well defect a second time, may redefect. The experience of fifteen years supports this conclusion. A substantial percentage of defectors from the USSR since 1945 have eventually returned to their homeland. It is important that this redefection potential and its attendant counterintelligence risk be kept in mind during the handling of a defector.

Organizing the Handlers

If the field station concludes from its initial assessment that its walk-in should be accepted as a defector, its next problem is to set up handlers to take care of him, to probe his story, and to explore his store of useful information. There should always be at least two interviewers; the more the better. It has been empirically demonstrated that handling personnel should be selected not only for their experience and linguistic ability, but also for their knowledge of Communism, of politics, and especially of what makes a Communist tick. This latter requirement is overriding; yet sometimes it cannot be satisfied, and some redefections are traceable to bad handling.

The handling arrangements can sometimes be elaborate. When a station with considerable experience in defector handling once found itself unexpectedly confronted with the possibility that a female army officer might soon be in its hands, it organized a team consisting of two men—one the team chief and senior interrogator, the other a counterintelligence ana-

lyst—and three women, one to act as reports officer and part-time companion, one who spoke the prospective defector's native tongue to act solely as companion and friend, and one to do the secretarial work for the team. It was calculated that if the men confronting the defector were outnumbered by the women, she would adjust herself more quickly to the situation and the exploitation of her information would be speeded. The validity of this theory was not to be tested, however: fearing the fate of her parents at home, the woman decided in the end against defection.

A frequent practice, when the defector is not wholly cooperative, is to choose two intelligence officers and use them to stage a little drama around him. One of them, an experienced, businesslike, purposeful, and tough-minded inquisitor, is the villain. He is forceful, unbending, and if necessary thoroughly incredulous. The defector needs, therefore, a friend, a benefactor to protect him from the villain. The benefactor should be chosen for his resemblance to the defector in age, in physical size, and if possible in ethnic origin. He acts the role of an understanding, easy-going, comforting companion. His intelligence questions, once a full biography has been obtained, are impersonal, concerned with non-sensitive aspects of the defector's knowledge and experience.

A vigorous ostensible tug-of-war is soon flourishing between benefactor and inquisitor. The defector is likely to confide to the benefactor things which he has obstinately or perversely withheld from the inquisitor. The inquisitor can use the information thus obtained by the benefactor along with the statements he himself gets from the defector as the basis for a close scrutiny of the defector's story.

Ideally, the inquisitor should be represented by *several* trained interrogators, specializing respectively in area knowledge, counterintelligence, and perhaps propaganda; and the benefactor should be a group of off-duty escorts and companions. (If security officers act as guards or companions they should be under the managerial direction of the operations officer in charge.) It is better not to have to eat, sleep, and play with a person whom you are trying to squeeze dry of every bit of information he has; the two functions are incongruous. At headquarters there is usually no excuse for

combining them, but few field stations have the resources to achieve the ideal separation.

The handling of the handlers themselves is another aspect of the management problem. It is usually necessary to take these intelligence officers suddenly away from their regular duties and often physically move them to another place to devote their full attention to the defector. They need time to study their debriefing guides in advance, to compare them with questions already put and answers received, to compare notes with one another, to transcribe or dictate raw reports, to compile personality and security evaluations, to eat, sleep, and rest. The pressures on them are great, and otherwise promising apprentice intelligence officers have more than once found their undoing in the handling of a defector. Even as the defector must be treated with purposeful pressure and consistent discipline on the one hand and with understanding and tolerance on the other, his handlers must be pushed, but with consideration. They must get out the reports, but they must also have time to study and discuss their problems with colleagues and supervisors, and they need days off completely away from the defector.

Probing the Story

By the time the handling is well organized, information from headquarters concerning the defector's background begins flowing into the field post. This may indicate that the man is not so important a source as he was initially assessed to be or as he himself believes. Or he is more important. Or he is withholding information concerning past intelligence or security service connections. Or he has not told us about his marriage-gone-sour, a well-known biographical item in his home country, which possibly has a bearing on his defection. There may be traces of past embezzlement, larceny, murder or other criminal acts. And so on. The field intelligence officers should expect the appearance of discrepancies, should look for them, and do their best to get to the bottom of each element of mystery.

On the other hand, any unnecessary duplicate questioning may impair the genuine defector's morale and attitude. Often the bulk of the information available on a defector has come from other defectors; birds of a feather flee together. Many

defectors survive in their new worlds by becoming, plainly, career informants, dispensing over many years their stores of information. A good proportion of such persons become attached more or less permanently to established intelligence services, with a vested personal interest in retaining this employment. Some of them will therefore, consciously or not, submit information intended to disparage, disprove, or discredit a competitive new defector. The intelligence service sometimes thus finds itself in the position of having to choose between two incompatible sets of purported facts advanced by two rival defector sources.

Every moment of interview, every question and answer, should be recorded—openly, unless the defector is hostile. For this purpose the magnetic tape recorder has a number of advantages over cylindrical or belt-type office voice transcribers; and mere notes, longhand or shorthand, are quite inadequate. The tape can be replayed to the defector if details in his story later turn out to be contradictory, confusing, or misleading. His awareness that every word he utters is being taped, that a small archive is being built up on everything he admits, denies, volunteers, and withholds, will have a salutary influence. The persistence necessary to clear up discrepancies can sometimes spoil the relationship between the defector and his handlers, perhaps rendering him useless for further exploitation under clandestine conditions. If this happens, the field station is best relieved of him, and the sooner the better.

Intelligence Debriefing

A more rewarding aspect of the defector processing is his systematic topic-by-topic intelligence debriefing. We have noted that the initial assessment of the defector included an areas-of-knowledge list or chart. This can usually be prepared by an experienced intelligence officer after 12 or 15 hours of interview. For example, in the case of a Polish military intelligence officer who had been attached to the International Control Commission in Viet Nam, ten major areas of knowledge were charted—(1) organization and operation of the Polish United Workers (Communist) Party, (2) organization and operation of the Polish Ministry of Defense, (3) Polish military commitments outside Poland, (4) military and political

build-up in the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam, (5) belligerent intentions of the USSR and Communist China, (6) organization and operations of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (7) organization and operation of the Military Intelligence Service, (8) organization and operation of other Polish ministries and commissions, (9) applied Marxism-Leninism in Poland, and (10) Western propaganda weaknesses in Poland.

The areas of information on which intelligence and security service defectors, especially deep-cover agents, can speak with competence are apt to be unclear. Some of these operatives are remarkably ill informed, sometimes even misinformed, on the organization and personnel of their former services. Intelligence and security personnel can most often provide valuable background information on government and Party leaders, past coups, trials, and purges, and other politico-historical events.

If practicable, a clerk-analyst should card each question to be asked the defector and later cross-reference his answer. In one debriefing conducted in Washington, where it was possible to keep good records, 44,000 distinct questions asked two Soviet defectors were tallied during the first 12 months.

During the debriefings the intelligence officers need to exercise their imaginations to the full to keep the defector (and themselves as well) keen and productive. A normal day's questioning sessions run about six hours; but when the defector has been led into information areas of great personal interest there may be days when he begins talking right after breakfast and does not finish until the wee hours of the following morning. At other times he may be sullen, confused, dazed ("God, what have I done?"), or plainly recalcitrant. During his periods of depression he should be afforded all the amenities and a degree of privacy consistent with what precautions seem advisable against the possibility of suicide or self-mutilation. Happily, this latter problem is a rare one, but we have had defectors who became morose to the point of will for self-destruction. We have also had raving maniacs (one in particular from a satellite intelligence service) who have had to be kept under sedation or in straitjackets, or both.

Yet another problem may be piled on the field station's heavy burden of tasks in systematic exploration of the defector's areas of knowledge, determination of his bona fides, and ministrations to his needs, moods and conflicts—that of suppressing publicity concerning the defection. The discreet and expeditious handling of information obtained from and about a defector is difficult enough within the bounds of our own country; in the field, it can pose some monumental problems.

Termination of Initial Phase

The first phase of defector handling ends with the official determination of the defector's bona fides. This determination is made at headquarters with the participation of the Inter-Agency Defector Committee on the basis of the following items submitted by the field: (a) a detailed biography of the defector (which is then checked against all available records and extant sources); (b) a complete record of his security and intelligence functions and connections; (c) the record of a medical examination, including interviews by a cleared psychiatrist; and (d) the results of a polygraph test. In some cases the determination can be made within two to three weeks of the time of defection, but generally it is more like two to three months.

Now agreements are made with the defector concerning country of resettlement, immigration, assistance in obtaining employment, interim financial aid, transportation for his family, and so on. One or more of his handling officers escort him to the next point on his itinerary and remain with him long enough to obviate any confusion or panic and ensure a smooth transfer to the new handlers. The field station's part of the job is then done, and the defector is ready for a long series of exhaustive interviews to develop minute detail on subjects that emerged prominent in the field station's explorations of his areas of knowledge.

Do's and Don't's in Defector Reception

Do:

Have the defector write and sign a statement of his desire for asylum.

Cable headquarters for guidance at the earliest moment.

House the defector in a place not previously used operationally and to be discarded after he leaves.

If you have a choice, prepare legitimate travel documentation for defectors and case officers rather than move them "black."

Make the defector prove his own bona fides; take the position that he must do something for us before we can do things for him.

Assume that he is a test or provocation or that he will redefect until headquarters has concurred in the acceptance of his bona fides.

After establishment of his bona fides keep your security discipline at the same level as in your regular agent operations.

Press for critical positive intelligence and operational leads.

Provide the amenities, including means for amusement and diversion—games, reading material, phonograph, radio and TV if security permits, 16 mm. sound movies, sports facilities, short trips, company of the other sex, etc.

Do Not:

Make any commitments of any kind to the defector, beyond a general promise to help him, without prior approval from headquarters.

Give the impression that our interest is only in milking him dry before disposing of him like an empty container.

Show any sign of disagreement or rivalry among the handling personnel except in the context of the inquisitor-benefactor tactic.

Let him master a situation by displays of temper, irritability, or other emotion.

Let him assume a position of superiority or make a show of ego to advantage.

Blame headquarters, the organization, or the government for delays and difficulties which the defector construes as showing disinterest in his case. His questions or criticisms can be met with the reminder that a great deal of organizing, coordinating, and planning is required to make the right decisions and take the actions dictated by his own best interests.