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ESPIONAGE

The Defector

Twice weekly in Geneva's Palais des Nations, a stocky, dark-haired Russian named Yuri Ivanovich Nosenko took his seat among the other secretaries, clerks, aides and technicians in the Soviet delegation at the 17-nation disarmament conference. But though Nosenko was billeted with other low-ranking Soviet staffers in Geneva's Hotel Rex, it was obvious that he enjoyed special status. He roomed alone, spoke fluent English, had a different work schedule from that of his colleagues, often came home alone late at night after all the others were in. The reason was that, unknown to his fellow delegates, Nosenko's specialty was espionage. He was a ranking officer in the K.G.B., the Soviet agency that combines the functions of the C.I.A. and F.B.I.

Fortnight ago, the day before he was scheduled to return to Moscow, Nosenko told colleagues he was going off for lunch at a downtown restaurant. When he failed to return next morning, frantic Soviet officials ordered all the remaining Russians at the hotel into a delegation compound and stripped Nosenko's room of all his personal effects. They seemed particularly agitated when they could not find his valise. At last, the Russians called in the Swiss police. In vain, the cops checked Switzerland's hospitals, morgues, hotels, railroad stations, airports and border outposts. Nosenko had totally vanished.

Last week the U.S. State Department tersely reported that Nosenko had defected to the West and was "somewhere in the U.S." In fact, he was in Washington, where officials permitted Soviet and Swiss diplomats to interview him. Refuting Moscow's allegations of "improper" U.S. behavior, Nosenko declared that he had voluntarily decided not to return to Russia.

U.S. officials plainly regarded Nosenko, 36, as the biggest spy catch since Colonel Oleg Penkovsky, the Soviet military scientist who funneled military secrets to the West before being arrested and executed by the Russians last year. Nosenko apparently had brought with him invaluable operational and organizational details about the Soviet intelligence network, and officials hinted that his defection had already caused a shake-up within the Russian espionage system.