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Mystery of vanished Soviet savant deepens

By Ted Agres
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What happened to renowned Soviet scientist Vladimir Alexandrov?

Did he defect to the West while attending a conference in Spain? Was he killed or kidnapped by the Soviet intelligence agency, the KGB, because he was about to defect? Did right-wing terrorists in Europe do him in?

No one seems to know — not his wife in Moscow, nor his colleagues in Russia, California, London or Stockholm.

The Soviet authorities, if they know, aren't saying. They refer all questions to the International Red Cross, which doesn't have a clue.

What is known is that Dr. Vladimir Alexandrov is an expert in computer modeling and climate studies. He is director of the Climate Modeling Center of the Computational Sciences Center of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Moscow.

As a prominent, trusted scientist,

Dr. Alexandrov had been granted the unusual privilege of traveling abroad with his wife, Alya, and stepchild. He did so extensively, spending more than six months at a time as a visiting scientist at Lawrence Livermore Laboratories in California and at various U.S. and European centers for climate research.

He participated in scientific meetings around the world on the "nuclear winter" theme. This is the theory that any major nuclear exchange would so disrupt the atmosphere that the earth's climate would be drastically altered. The result would be a permanent "winter" in which life as we know it would suffer catastrophic consequences.

Although there is no consensus, many scientists in the United States and Europe agree with this hypothesis. Among themselves, some Soviet scientists dispute the theory, but the "official" party line, expressed by Boris Ponomarev in September's World Marxist Review, is that a 100-megaton exchange would virtually destroy the world.

Yet Soviet leaders believe nuclear war is survivable, as evidenced by their massive, nationwide civil defense program. Their casualties would be great, the Soviets say, but probably no more than the losses they incurred during World War II.

Some analysts have come to believe that the Soviets are using the nuclear winter hypothesis as part of a larger "peace campaign," or "active measures" drive, to push the West further into unilateral disarmament or at least to drive a wedge between the Western allies over missile deployments.

Dr. Alexandrov had been privy to the debates over whether nuclear war was indeed survivable. But some of his colleagues in the West

say he privately showed signs of disillusionment. While he had published many scientific articles on the dangers of nuclear winter, as far back as April 1983 he had criticized some of the approaches taken by Dr. Carl Sagan and others involved in the issue.

Last March, Dr. Alexandrov was in Madrid to attend a meeting of the Scientific Committee on the Protection of the Environment. He arrived about 10 days before the conference was to start. He checked into his hotel and is reported to have shown signs of acute gastric distress.

He left his bags, passport and some airline tickets in his room and reportedly decided to take a walk. That was the last time he was seen.

U.S. and British intelligence sources say he did not seek asylum. Reports from Moscow and from former associates at Lawrence Livermore indicate that his wife called California from Moscow in mid-April in an effort to locate him.