DEFECTORS' PROBLEMS IN THE WEST

Dmitry Mikheyev

Mr. Mikheyev, a Soviet defector to the United States, submitted a statement to the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Senate Government Affairs Committee, which in October 1987 was conducting hearings on the US Government's handling of Soviet and Communist Bloc defectors. Senator William S. Cohen, Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, sent the transcript to the Director of Central Intelligence with this comment: "His statement conveys in a very thoughtful way both the psychological mind-set of many defectors and the manner in which defectors therefore react to typical American behavior in the debriefing and resettlement processes." Mr. Mikheyev's testimony follows.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity to testify on a subject of the greatest importance, not only for the lives of hundreds of individuals caught in the middle of the confrontation between the two main socio-political systems of our time, but also for the future of this country as well.

In my view, the plight of people who served the communist regime, then, for political reasons, joined the forces of freedom and democracy, and after that experienced great difficulties in adjusting to a new culture, cuts to the very heart of the greatest conflict of our time. We are dealing here with a conflict of two extremely different cultures, not just two ideologies. We are talking about a clash of two mentalities.

Understanding the mentality of one's adversary is the most formidable challenge. In the final analysis, however, the rewards of doing so may be as high as the triumph of Western ideals in the world, not just the benefits of helping hundreds of courageous individuals become productive and happy Americans.

My name is Dmitry Mikheyev. I am currently a writer and broadcaster at the Voice of America in the United States Information Agency. I have lived in this country almost eight years and became a citizen of the USA two years ago.

I was born in the Soviet Union during the Second World War. My dissatisfaction with that system can, to a large extent, be attributed to Khrushchev's thaw. I was a teenager when the horrors of Stalin's purges were made public and my belief in the socialist system was shaken.

In 1961, in the middle of the thaw, I was a student at Moscow University and the chairman of the discussion club of the physics department. Discussions and debates were encouraged by the authorities for several years—until 1965, and I took advantage of this to raise political and social issues. During roughly the same period, I also became acquainted with a number of American and West European students who had come to the USSR to study for a year under exchange agreements.

My very unhappy experience in the debating society, extensive reading of *samizdat*, close associations with Westerners, and exposure to Voice of America

broadcasts and Western literature eventually led me to conclude that the communist system was fundamentally flawed. By the mid-1960s, I was totally convinced of the moral, economic and political superiority of American-type democracy. Yet I, along with many other Soviet intellectuals, maintained a belief that the Soviet system could somehow converge with the West and become democratic. The invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 put an end to all my hope for such a convergence. The moment I learned about the invasion, I decided to sever the umbilical cord tying me to the Soviet regime.

Because there was no way for me to leave the country legally, I decided to escape. I made my attempt in 1970 and failed because my dormitory room at Moscow University was bugged by the KGB. I was charged with high treason and put in a hard labor camp for political prisoners for six years. A couple of months prior to the Brezhnev-Carter summit in Vienna in 1979, I was expelled from the Soviet Union. The authorities apparently did not want to upset the upcoming event with a new arrest.

In the Mordovia hard labor camp #19, in 1972, I met hundreds of political opponents of the Soviet regime. I met people who, like myself, had tried to escape the Soviet Union and failed and, surprisingly, some who had defected and then returned to the USSR. My curiosity about the latter was enormous, because I could not imagine what could possibly bring these people to voluntarily return to the Soviet Union, and moreover to a Soviet prison, after several years in the West. I befriended several of them and listened to their stories. The most startling thing was that most of them knew that upon their return they would be punished.

Most of these returnees were soldiers and low ranking officers who defected to the West from East Germany, but there were several educated people: two musicians, two students, a couple of low ranking diplomats, interpreters and so on. Altogether, I came to know several dozen such people.

Since then, I have devoted a great deal of thought to the powerful forces that can push people to return to a much worse life, not only compared to the one available to them in the West, but even compared to their life before defection. The question of different cultures and their clash has become my true profession.

To understand the problem it would help if we ask ourselves two questions:

1. Considering that the Soviet system is, indeed, very awful and that many thousands of Soviets work and travel in the West, why do only a handful choose to defect?

2. Considering that the Soviet system is as cruel as it has always been, why did the KGB stop killing defectors in the West about 25 years ago?

Obviously, life in the West does not provide powerful enough incentives, and would-be defectors prefer their system, bad as it is.

The Soviets also learned from a half-century long history of defections that "imperialists" so poorly use defectors that it is not really worthwhile to take the risk and trouble killing them.

During my nine years at Moscow University, I had had a number of very good American, British, and Scandinavian friends. There was no doubt in my mind that there were very big differences in the way they and the Soviet people acted and thought. At that stage, however, I could not formulate my perceptions clearly and coherently.

It took several years of living in America and very intensive study, as well as the personal experience of being an emigre to understand the problems defectors face in the West.

A View of the World

Soviet defectors rejected their system, its values and all that it stands for. But they cannot, at least in the short term, alter the way in which they, and other typical Soviets, think. In other words, even though the content of their views has changed radically, their way of viewing the world and of dealing with it has not. Indeed, cast into a totally unfamiliar environment by the act of defection, they have no choice but to rely for guidance on their deepest instinct, their most fundamental perceptions about how people act and what causes things to happen. These perceptions were formed in totally different reality and, in many ways, are out-of-synch with the way things are in the West.

Typically a man with a Soviet mentality possesses the following subconscious view of the world, based on his experiences:

> He believes that people are generally greedy, selfish, and cruel, and therefore they are not to be trusted. They have to prove that they are trustworthy. They very rarely act out of compassion; if they approach you, it almost certainly means they want something from you, and you'd better watch out, because they will try to use you.

Americans, as a rule, have a much more optimistic view of people and the environment.

Every officer who deals with former Soviet citizens has to be aware of these instinctive reactions, and the very suspicious attitude the defector will have toward the officer's motives. Until the officer proves otherwise, the defector's working assumption will be that the officer cares little about him as a person and is just pursuing his personal interest.

Let me describe what goes through the mind of a defector during debriefing.

During the debriefing process, the intelligence officers are understandably interested in facts, places, names, actual events and so on. They are not writing novels about the personal dramas of people caught in a conflict between their personality and the requirements of a dehumanized system. But this conflict is the most important fact for the defector. His defection was the culmination of this conflict. Figuratively speaking, he cut off his hand, which was caught in a trap, in order to get his body and, most importantly, his personality free. His wound hurts badly. However, the people around him do not seem to care about his pain and want only to know the data they can put on the computer.

Soon the defector comes to his first negative conclusion: They (the Americans) are not interested in me as a person; they are only interested in

the information I possess. They are using me . . . Is this much different from the Soviet system? Not much, they just pay better. The Soviet officials were right when they said: If you defect, they will squeeze you like a lemon and throw you away.

Yet, most defectors are pleased by the fact they are helping the Americans fight the communists. They are finally getting even with the horrible system which humiliated them so many times.

The defector wants to participate in this fight as it continues and intensifies, because he knows that the other system is implementing its already existing plans and working on new ones.

Then comes the second shock. Debriefing is completed, and the defector is encouraged to think about returning to "normal life." Officers in the resettlement program think: We are giving him security in the United States under a new identity; we are providing some financial cushion and even some training in one of the professions. We have given him, therefore, all the opportunities and security the United States can offer. What else can one ask for? Social life? But nobody can provide it, one has to get it by himself. Furthermore, if he wants to continue his fight against communism, he is free to do so, but on his own.

However, most defectors look at the situation in a totally different and, in fact, almost opposite way. The way they feel is this:

> They (the Americans) took away my real name and, with it, my personality. They took from me everything they thought was valuable—the data. They bought it, they squeezed me and threw me into this horrifying ocean they call "freedom" which means for me the freedom to be alone; freedom to be exploited by those in a much stronger position than me, such as bankers, landlords, and employers; freedom to be killed, perhaps, by the local mafia or the KGB. They think that the names of the KGB officers and party apparatchiks I gave them is all I have to offer. What kind of fools are they? Or perhaps they think I am a "plant." Yes, they do not trust me and never will. They will keep an eye on me and make sure that I keep a low profile. I could be of tremendous help to them because I know how "THOSE" guys think and work, but I am helpless outside of a powerful institution. In order for my life to have meaning, I have to be a part of a powerful institution that is waging a war against communism. But this is exactly where they (the American establishment) does not want me to be, because they do not trust me.

During the first year in the West, these gloomy thoughts and doubts are cushioned by the experience of new colors, smells, beautiful scenery and goods, some allowance money and the absence of any real responsibility. But within a year or two, the novelty of the new environment wears off, and this is when the real psychological crisis strikes. Normally, the second year after defection is the crucial one.

A defector is not an ordinary man, in general, and not an ordinary Soviet man, in particular. As a psychological type, he is a nonconformist. His

personality and will are much stronger than those of an average man. His perceptions of himself and society are different from the perceptions of most people. He often sees himself in terms "I vs. Them" (society). He is a risk-taker, a doer, a person who does not just complain about situations and adapts to them, but also tends to change things.

On the other hand, a man in the Soviet system, including the highest officials, is daily humiliated and denigrated because this is the only way for the system to make its office holders comply with its rules. As a reward, the system provides them with privileges and the right to humiliate others. Eventually, most people will accept their position in the pyramid as the ultimate criterion of their importance, or dimensions of their personality: the closer one is placed to the top of the pyramid, the bigger are his personal dimensions, the greater is his self-esteem. In the Soviet Union, there is no other way to measure the worth of a man but his position in the hierarchy—no private property, popularity, fame or awards upon which to construct an alternative sense of worth, unlike, for example, the situation in the United States.

Having found himself out of a familiar coordinate system, the defector goes through a very painful identity crisis. Who is he—an engineer, scientist, linguist, or military man? Perhaps in the Soviet system of coordinates, yes, but these American engineers, military and intelligence men are so different; they are real professionals; and they are established in their system. How can I compete?

These painful questions are asked by every defector. But they will be particularly painful for those whose profession is totally irrelevant in the West.

Resurrecting Identity

In other words, the defectors have to resurrect their identities or build them anew. This is why they, and even emigres, are so eager to talk about themselves to anybody who is willing to provide a friendly, sympathetic ear. Self-examination is essentially a cleansing process. For defectors, restoring their personal identity, not learning about the new world, is their first priority.

A friend of mine, who worked for five years with the Soviet emigres arriving in Vienna, Austria, told me that she was overwhelmed by their desire to talk to her about their personal life stories.

However, debriefing officers are not particularly interested in the psychological drama of rebirth. They assume they are dealing with mature, strong personalities and hard facts of intelligence importance, while the defector is starting over from scratch and questions everything, most of all his own potential, merits, desires and so on.

It is also important to remember that every defector is a man with a mission. Very rarely will he defect just for a better life alone. He has his mission, and this mission usually involves some sort of struggle with the Soviet system, which defectors not only hate politically, but with which he also has some personal scores to settle, as well. A defector hates the system he had fled and wishes to damage it as much as he can. Revenge is his immediate all-encompassing task and mission.

Moreover, the defector assumes that the West is in a state of mortal struggle with the Soviet system, realizing only too well that the latter has declared a sort of war on the West. The defector considers himself a soldier; he knows how dangerous the enemy is; he is ready to fight; but to his great chagrin he discovers that there are few people in the West who feel the same way he does, and there are no institutions in the West designed to wage systematic warfare against the Soviet system. Those who are supposed to be in the forefront of the struggle are just trying to contain the Soviets and neutralize their activities, rather than attempting to confuse, disrupt, and attack the enemy. The defector is convinced that he knows how to fight in this war and wants to take command over a detachment to help wage the battle. His new comrades in arms, however, do not appear very eager to fight; all they want is to do their job in order to earn a good living. Moreover, they do not even trust him fully.

On the other hand, having spent many years in the Soviet system, the defector tends to recognize its features in American government agencies that handle him, and probably to exaggerate the extent to which they characterize the American system. Almost unconsciously, he starts to fall into the pattern of trying to "beat the system" the way he did in the Soviet Union. That is, he thinks in the categories "I vs. Them" and tries to get as much as he can from the system.

Unlike emigres, defectors usually do not have a community of friends, relatives and acquaintances upon whom they can rely. They have left behind their friends and loved ones. They hardly have a thing from the previous life; everything is new. They are lucky if they can occasionally meet another defector and learn from his (normally bitter) experience.

People who try to help defectors have to be aware of how to do it without wounding their pride. There are certain cultural values that are totally different in the two societies.

For example, if after the debriefing the defector receives a lump sum of resettlement money, he might regard it as pay for the information he provided, not as a nest egg from which to finance the transition to his new life. He is likely to feel uncomfortable about this money no matter how strongly he hates the Soviet regime. Very often, a Russian will intentionally try to spend this money as quickly as possible. It would be psychologically better for the defector to receive a monthly allowance, preferably associated with some future activity of his, rather than a lump sum which he can only associate with activities of the past.

An additional consideration is that the hierarchy of occupations in the Soviet Union is very different from that in the United States. In the USSR, a writer is superior to almost anybody; an intelligence officer ranks above a lawyer or a medical man, a professor at a university is second to none, and so on. If this scale of values is neglected or disregarded while a defector is offered professional training, his pride and ego may be severely wounded.

Also, the ingenuous American respect for the privacy of others may be read as a lack of attention and interest, or profound heartlessness.

Similarly, the refusal of an American to participate in a heavy drinking session with the defector may be interpreted as an indication of dishonest intentions.

Finally, the notorious American straightforwardness is usually taken for either stupidity or utter cunningness.

Russian and American concepts of friendship also differ dramatically. In America, friend is a very loose term. Americans may have hundreds of "friends"—many of whom could be people they have met only several times in their lives. In the hostile environment of the Soviet Union, a friend means a close, intimate friend who is willing to cover your back, or, in extreme circumstances, even sacrifice his life for you. In the USSR, one can have only one, two or, at a maximum, three true FRIENDS and these are earned through loyalty shown during years of mutual troubles and hardship. The defector desperately needs a Russian-style FRIEND, particularly after the debriefing is over and he is left on his own. But precisely at this time even the rather loose friendly ties with intelligence officers are severed—time, distance and new assignments separate them from the defector. This is very unfortunate because his mistrust of people at this point is still very high; his English language abilities are still poor; he does not accept many American social values (he hates receptions, football, baseball, hamburgers, American women, suburban life and so on).

Recommendations

Defectors should live close to a large cultural center (life in "the provinces" is, for him, equivalent to exile).

Defectors need an institution to be affiliated with. However, it should not be a big, bureaucratic institution, but instead, an "influential" one. It should provide a place where he can feel needed and where he can start the laborious process of rebuilding his shattered sense of personal identity. It should be a place where he can feel resonably secure, where he can fulfill his mission and build his social life.

There should also be a place where defectors can learn, teach and receive both personal and public attention. Therefore, it should be a university, a company, a think tank, or a foundation.

A defector needs a steady income for at least three years. I am against giving defectors large sum of money. It would be better for him to "earn" it. Besides, the bulk of a lump sum installment may be wasted for lack of knowledge of how to manage it. A life-long allowance should be reserved for special cases of particularly valuable, elderly defectors whose chances for adaptation to a new culture are very slim. Perhaps someone older than 50 should be eligible for a permanent income.

A defector also needs the opportunity to meet other defectors, but not to be locked in their community.

He needs a place where friendly people can answer the thousands of questions he has about matters that Americans very often take for granted: how

to use the Yellow Pages, talk to an auto mechanic, find an apartment, open a checking account, buy a car, get a driver's license, hire a lawyer, use a credit card and money machine, retrieve a towed-away car, write a job application and not to get frustrated after three refusals. Obviously, this could only be a private institution with a staff of consultants who have a reasonable background in communist affairs.

• • •

With a new leadership in Moscow, the importance of psychological aspects of confrontation between the two socio-political systems will undoubtedly rise. Our better handling of defectors is becoming a very important element of this confrontation. We can already see the new breed of highly educated and sophisticated Soviet operatives in the West. They represent a formidable adversary, but they are also potential defectors. Who they are going to be depends to a large extent on our ability to handle defectors.