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MISSING CIA TURNCOAT TAKES ASYLUM IN USSR

A FIRED CIA agent who vanished last September after selling intelligence secrets to the KGB turned up in the Soviet Union yesterday and was granted political asylum.

Edward Lee Howard, 34, was identified by the government newspaper Izvestia as a "former worker of the CIA" who was "given the right of residence in the USSR for political reasons."

The brief announcement on Izvestia's back page did not say where Howard was, where he had been for the last 11 months, or what he had been doing.

Credit cards he took with him were used in Helsinki and other places outside the Soviet Union, U.S. officials have said.

He is believed to be the first CIA agent or former agent to defect to the Soviet Union and the first American to defect since the 1960s.

Howard was fired by the CIA in 1983 after two years of training as a contact man for U.S. agents in Moscow.

He was fingered as a KGB informer in July 1985 by Vitaly Yurchenko, the Russian agent who defected to the U.S., then changed his mind and returned to Moscow.

Since Howard's disappearance, five American agents have been caught by the Soviet secret police in the Moscow area.

In addition, a Soviet engineer who wanted to provide top-secret technical data to the U.S. was caught and executed, sources said.

U.S. officials attribute the roundup directly to the information Howard gave to

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the KGB.

"He wiped out Moscow station," said one official.

George Carver, a former CIA deputy director, said Howard knew the names of some CIA people in Moscow as well as techniques used there.

"To my knowledge," Carver said, "he is the first to go directly to the Soviets with a wealth of detail."

The result, he said, was a "loss of major magnitude."

Howard was fired by the CIA when he failed a lie detector test and evidence turned up that he had a drinking problem and had engaged in petty theft.

He and his wife, Mary, moved to Santa Fe, where he worked with the New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee.

His first known contact with the KGB took place in September 1984 in Austria, where the Howards were vacationing.

After that trip, he displayed expensive watches, gold Krugerrands and Soviet cigars to his friends in New Mexico.

It was not until last August that he was fingered by Yurchenko, which prompted a new FBI investigation into his actions.