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Did Yurchenko Fool the CIA?

He was trumpeted as one of the most important defectors in years—a career Soviet agent who, U.S. intelligence sources said, had risen through the ranks to become deputy director of KGB intelligence operations in all of North America. A big fish, U.S. officials said, the genuine article—a master spy and a font of invaluable information about Soviet tactics in the never-ending secret war between the KGB and the CIA. But last week the CIA's bubble burst wide open—for in a startling news conference at the Soviet Embassy in Washington, Vitaly Sergeyevich Yurchenko, 49, announced his defection to the Soviet Union.

Speaking mostly in Russian and sometimes in heavily accented English, Yurchenko told a lurid tale that seemed designed to make the CIA look like a gang of incompetent thugs. He said he had been kidnapped, drugged and kept in isolation at a CIA safe house near Fredericksburg, Va., for three "horrible" months. His guards were "fat" and "stupid" and his chief caretaker was a "psychologically sick" Vietnam veteran who seemed to "hate all humanity." At one point he had been offered \$1 million to tell what he knew—and at another he was taken to CIA headquarters in a drug-induced "fog" to have dinner with CIA Director William J. Casey. Finally, Yurchenko said, he was "able to break out to freedom" due to a "momentary lapse" by his captors. He fled to the Soviet Embassy compound, where he was welcomed back to the fold and ordered to tell his story to the world—and the worst of it for the CIA was that too many of the details were true.

Totally False: Yurchenko took off for Moscow two days later, leaving embarrassed administration officials to wonder what went wrong. For starters, the State Department denied that he had been kidnapped or coerced: Secretary of State George Shultz, in Moscow for a round of presummit meetings with party leader Mikhail Gorbachev and other Soviet leaders (page 48), said Yurchenko's charges of bru-

ality were "totally false." Other U.S. officials worried that the incident might poison the atmosphere in Geneva, and some suggested that Yurchenko may have been sent by the KGB to mislead Ronald Reagan about Soviet intentions at the summit. The president's senior advisers maintained that fear was groundless, however, and Reagan himself said that Yurchenko's information was "not anything new or sensational." But in the wake of the diplomatic wrangle over Ukrainian sailor Miroslav Medvid in New Orleans, defector controversies seemed to be part of a nerve-jangling buildup to the summit (page 36). Reagan was struck by the odd coincidence of three different Soviet defections in a single week. "You can't rule out the possibility that this might have been a deliberate ploy, a maneuver," Reagan said. "[But] we just have to live with it."

Perhaps—but it was already plain that

Yurchenko's disappearance had thrown the American intelligence community into turmoil. There was little doubt the CIA had bungled: the only questions were how, and how badly. If Yurchenko were a genuine defector who had a genuine change of heart, the agency was guilty of sloppy or amateurish handling of a prized intelligence "asset." But if, as Reagan implied, Yurchenko had been a KGB plant all along, the damage was far worse: CIA officials from top to bottom had swallowed his story whole, and the agency had suffered an embarrassing defeat whose consequences might be felt for years. There were hard questions ahead, careers on the line and a widening search for scapegoats that could, in the end, lead to a wholesale shake-up within the agency; the most anyone would say last week was that the 72-year-old Casey, a favorite of conservatives and the president alike, was himself likely to survive any impending purge.

Meanwhile, the episode provided fascinating glimpses of the secret world of espionage—for if nothing else, the Yurchenko case was a great spy yarn. U.S. intelligence

sources confirmed a number of hitherto-secret details about the CIA's handling of its lost defector. It was evidently true, for example, that the agency had debriefed Yurchenko in a private home outside Fredericksburg, and it was evidently true that the agency at one point had offered him a \$1 million bonus and a lifetime contract for his cooperation. It was true that Yurchenko met with Casey, and it was true that he had "escaped" from the agency's custody by giving his handler the slip. Sources also confirmed a melodramatic wrinkle the defector failed to mention to the press: that Yurchenko was pursuing a longtime romance with the wife of a Soviet diplomat stationed in Canada, and that he had apparently changed his mind when his mistress refused to defect with him.

Flying Colors: The bare outlines of Yurchenko's story, so far as it was known, suggested that his journey to America had been anything but a kidnapping—and indeed, there was every indication that he had been treated with extravagant hospitality. According to the State Department, Yurchenko voluntarily defected to the U.S. Embassy in Rome on Aug. 1. Sometime thereafter he was flown to the United States, where Yurchenko said he was guarded by a six-man team headed by a CIA employee named Colin Thompson. Yurchenko submitted to a battery of lie-detector tests and passed, according to Reagan administration sources, "with flying colors." He and his guards reportedly were sequestered for the duration of his interrogation in a "safe house" outside Fredericksburg, an easy commute from CIA headquarters in Langley, Va. The rented house, a comfortable modern Colonial, sits on a secluded lot in a sparsely developed subdivision called Coventry.

To hear Yurchenko tell it, the CIA had indeed sent him to Coventry—for one of his

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biggest complaints was that he "did not have any chance to speak Russian." His press-conference allegations that the CIA kidnapped, tortured and drugged him, however, were a near-perfect rendition of Soviet propaganda, and a CIA spokesman, in a rare on-the-record statement, said Yurchenko's version of events was "a fairy tale." "When you are in such isolation, you are helpless," he told reporters. "Nobody pays attention to what you are protesting. And even if I try to commit suicide they won't give me such chance to escape. Because 24 hours, even when I was sleeping, they prohibited even to close the door. And [in the] next room was sitting such [a] fat, quiet, stupid, excuse me, nonemotional person . . . if I tried to close the door he immediately opened the door and [was] sitting [watching] TV. I practically don't have normal rest or sleep." Chief interrogator Thompson, he said, was a "veteran in Vietnam, he was wounded. It seemed to me he was [a] killer, too, and it seems to me he has

income of the U.S. president when he retires."

They also tried to help him with his love life. Yurchenko has a wife, a married daughter and a 16-year-old adopted son in the Soviet Union—but he told the CIA he wanted to start a new life in the United States with a longtime lady friend, whom he identified as the wife of a Soviet diplomat stationed in Canada. Trying desperately to keep him happy, the CIA team reportedly took Yurchenko north in late September for a tryst with the diplomat's wife. They drove to Ottawa, where the diplomat is stationed. But the diplomat's wife spurned the overture—and, according to one source, "that was a big disappointment" to Yurchenko.*

Big Policy: The debriefing seemed to go badly after that. Intelligence sources insist that Yurchenko provided much valuable information early on—but they concede that he clammed up during the last five weeks of his captivity. Yurchenko said he gave them no information at all unless he was drugged—which he implied was much of the time. He said he was drugged, for instance, when his handlers took him to CIA headquarters in Langley to have dinner with Casey. "I remember that I was brought to the main building . . . and that I was taken by elevator to the seventh floor to Mr. Casey's office," he said. "That was the point of the strongest effect of the drug, [so] that when Mr. Casey entered the office I did not recognize him. I rose, greeted him and later we went to Mr. Casey's dining room and had dinner." Their talk, he scoffed, "was kind of general conversation of big policy issues regarding the summit—things which they usually write about in the newspapers."

By October Yurchenko was banging on the bars of his golden cage. He was distressed, he said, that his case had attracted so much attention in the media, and he was even more distressed that the CIA passed along a number of letters from reporters asking him questions about the information he had given. Burton Gerber, chief of the CIA's Soviet desk, played middleman for the media. "Alex, we have received many requests from our media—NBC, ABC companies would like to speak with you," Yurchenko recalled Gerber telling him. "I answered him, 'Mr. Gerber, I'm not ready now.'" Yurchenko was particularly troubled by a Washington Post story saying he had confirmed that the KGB had kidnapped and killed double agent Nicholas Shadrin in Vienna in 1975. Shadrin's widow was suing the CIA for damages; Yurchenko thought he would be called to testify. "I asked Mr. Gerber, 'Aren't you ashamed? I will be taken to an American court . . . because it seems to me I'm going to be the only witness for that.'" And [Gerber] told

me, 'Don't worry, we'll settle everything. The main thing is to influence people.'"

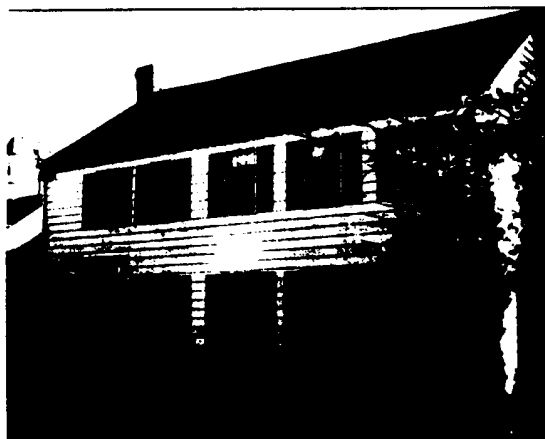
The uneasy rapport with his warders vanished. On one occasion, when the safe house had women visitors, Yurchenko noticed one of the guards sitting with his feet up on a cocktail table, jacket thrown open to reveal his gun. "From my point of view, to sit together with some ladies [with] his gun open and his feet on the table . . . it's not polite," Yurchenko said. "I said, 'What are you doing?' And he—that's his mentality—he said, 'Oh, I understand, it's your furniture.' He decided I am worrying about [the furniture] because they know all about the agreement. He respects private property and immediately takes a piece of paper and began to polish" the table.

'Not Your Fault': Yurchenko's "break-out" came on Nov. 2—but it was hardly a great escape. In fact, he was having dinner at a restaurant in Washington with a single CIA handler when, according to sources, the defector simply walked away. The restaurant, Au Pied de Cochon, is a popular Georgetown bistro much frequented by the city's international crowd; it was so crowded on the evening of Nov. 2, according to owner Yves Courbois, that Yurchenko and his companion must have waited in line for at least 10 minutes to get a table. The two men ate dinner without attracting the attention of Courbois's staff, which suggests that the ensuing drama was strictly low key. Yurchenko waited to spring his surprise

until the CIA man was picking up the check. "What would you do if I got up and walked out? Would you shoot me?" he reportedly asked. "No, we don't treat defectors that way," the CIA man replied. "I'll be back in 15 or 20 minutes," Yurchenko said. "If I'm not, it's not your fault."

To U.S. intelligence experts, Yurchenko's litany of accusations and complaints was nothing more than blatant Soviet propaganda. His three main charges—that he was kidnapped, tortured and drugged—were ludicrous, they said. "Anybody who has eyes, ears and half a brain knows that his account of being drugged, kidnapped and tortured was made up of whole cloth," says former CIA man George Carver. In truth, Carver and other experts say, strong-arm methods gain little in defection cases—for the subject will either resist interrogation or fabricate what he thinks his interrogators want to hear. The use of truth serums, by the same token, is said to be largely myth. There are legal, ethical and moral problems, says one CIA veteran, but the agency doesn't use drugs—even sodium pentothal—because they usually don't work. "If there's something down deep inside someone's psyche, drugs won't get it out," this source says. "You're not going to get a guy's brain to tell you something he doesn't want to tell you."

Debriefing a defector, particularly a knowledgeable agent like Yurchenko, is essentially a process of eliciting his voluntary cooperation—though carrot-and-stick



The safe house in Coventry: Secret chic

continued to do the same thing here." Thompson "hate[s] all humanity," Yurchenko said, "because he is a psychologically sick person." (A CIA spokesman said, "We stand by our men.")

His handlers, Yurchenko said, used a combination of threats and promises to soften him up. At times, he said, they warned him, "If you flee and return to the Soviet Union anyway, a prison and death is awaiting you. We'll send the KGB all the materials we got from you, and you will be jailed there." At other times they offered him a lucrative contract as a CIA consultant. "I was supposed to get \$1 million beginning Nov. 1 . . . as a down payment. And to the end of my life they were going to pay me annually \$62,500, and that sum would grow taking into account inflation," he said. The agreement included fringe benefits as well: free medical care for life and all the furniture in the rented safe house, which cost the CIA \$48,000. All told, Yurchenko said, he would be paid something like \$180,000 a year—which is more, he said, "than the

*U.S. and Canadian officials denied that the death of a Soviet trade official's wife in Toronto last week had any connection to the Yurchenko case. The Russian woman, an apparent suicide, fell to her death the day before Yurchenko flew back to Moscow; a Soviet spokesman said she had been under treatment for depression for some time.

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pressure, such as Yurchenko described, may well be used. The stick is mostly bluff: the CIA has no real sanctions, legal or otherwise, that it can use. That means CIA interrogators must bank heavily on using the carrot—and Yurchenko's debriefing, despite his many complaints, illustrates that fact well. He was housed in comfort, nursed through his romantic problems and offered the CIA's equivalent of the golden handshake: all in all, a senior U.S. official says, he was treated "like a colleague."

Indeed, most of the CIA's critics now say the agency should have coddled him even more. Carver says the interrogation team should have provided a Russian-speaking "babysitter"—someone who could play chess, drink vodka and swap dirty stories by the hour; someone who knows the Russian soul and the defector's mind. Another mistake, according to Carver, was the Reagan administration's eagerness to publicize its prize catch. "Yurchenko was ticked off at the way his information was leaked, and he was ticked off not only in the abstract but in the sense that he may have seen the leaks as having a direct bearing on the situation of his wife and family," Carver says. "But the very fact that we had a senior defector shouldn't have been blabbed, and the little nuggets he provided shouldn't have been spread over the networks and the newspapers the way they were. We should have absolutely stonewalled on this guy."

In a Funk: Most of all, these critics say, the CIA team failed to ease Yurchenko through a wholly predictable bout of the defector blues (page 40). Like most Soviet turncoats, Yurchenko seemed to have been motivated by a combination of disillusionment with the Soviet system and personal problems. He "hated his wife, hated his two kids, hated the system," one official says. As a result, the theory goes, his lady friend's rejection came as a crushing blow that led Yurchenko to reconsider his defection. "My personal opinion was always that he was in a tough emotional state and maybe . . . that he wasn't handled as well as he could have been," says Sen. Dave Durenberger, a member of the Senate Select Intelligence Committee. "We could see for the last five weeks that he was in that kind of funk." Given his mood, this theory goes, the probability that he would be jailed or punished by the KGB was not enough to deter his redefection: just last year another Soviet defector, journalist Oleg Bitov, apparently redefected without disappearing into the Gulag. Bitov returned to Moscow, claiming he had been kidnapped and coerced by British intelligence agents—similar to Yurchenko's allegations last week.

The fact remains, however, that all of this psychologizing may be wholly beside the point—for there are those who simply do not believe that Yurchenko was ever a genuine defector. In their view, his crossover in Rome was only the beginning of a deliberate

KGB maneuver to spread "disinformation" among U.S. policymakers on the eve of the Reagan-Gorbachev summit. Another objective could have been to humiliate and disrupt the CIA.* Yurchenko's dramatic redefection, they say, was merely the final act—a propaganda charade made all the more clever by his selective use of the truth. "What he did was to take the truth and . . . subject it to ridicule and satire," one counterintelligence veteran says. "[It] was for the purpose of embarrassing and immobilizing the rank and file at the CIA." Republican Sen. William S. Cohen says Yurchenko's defection to the CIA "seemed too convenient. But they were riding a wave of euphoria out at Langley—they had landed the biggest fish of all time, and they were eager to proceed." Another skeptic, Democratic Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, says, "The worst possible case is that [Yurchenko] was a double agent who was sent out to embarrass and disrupt the CIA." If so, Leahy says, "this was a real calamity" that casts serious doubt on the CIA's methods for verifying defector information. "Personally," Leahy adds, "I think he was a plant. I hope I'm wrong."

*One of the more exotic theories about why the KGB may have sent Yurchenko to defect involves Oleg Gordiyevsky, head of the KGB in London and a double agent who defected in London last summer. Just before his defection, Gordiyevsky was recalled to KGB headquarters in Moscow for "consultations" and, according to a BBC documentary airing this week, British agents somehow managed to rescue him from within the Soviet Union itself—a brilliant bit of derring-do and a bitter defeat for the KGB. Seen against that background, the Yurchenko case may have been the KGB's way of getting even—and its attempt to force Western intelligence agencies to be more cautious in recruiting future defectors.



*Ottawa tryst:
Despite the CIA's
help, the lady said no*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALAN HEINGOLD

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The truth about Yurchenko may never be known—though the debate is almost guaranteed to continue for many months to come. In the meantime the CIA is sticking to its guns: Yurchenko was a genuine defector, sources say, and a valuable one. “The main reason to believe he wasn’t a plant is that he brought information that he wouldn’t have given if he were a plant,” one official says. “He gave us a great deal.” Yurchenko is said to have tipped the CIA to Edward L. Howard, a disgruntled former agency employee who gave the KGB crucial information leading to a Russian scientist spying for the CIA. Howard disappeared last September from his home in New Mexico, presumably for the Soviet Union. Ironically, however, Yurchenko’s redefection has now undermined the FBI’s case against Howard. “We didn’t have a case before, and now we have even less of one,” a Justice Department official said.

Even senior officials conceded, however, that Yurchenko should have been more tightly guarded that night at the Georgetown restaurant—and one official promises that the agency will now “take a good look” at the whole Yurchenko affair, including the basic question of whether Yurchenko’s defection was genuine. Leahy would like “a real hard look” at Yurchenko’s bona fides and the CIA’s handling of the case, with an impartial “ombudsman” conducting the review. Others say the agency must improve its counterintelligence arm, which would be the CIA’s first line of defense against a phony defector. “Casey is not in trouble unless he fails to make some changes out there,” says Sen. Malcolm Wallop. In the Yurchenko case, he adds, the CIA professionals “weren’t humble enough to believe they could be fooled.”

The agency is under fire on another front as well. The reason: the leaked disclosure of a top-secret CIA plan to undermine Libyan strongman Muammar Kaddafi, which appeared in



Under guard: No privacy—and a ‘fat, stupid’ handler

The Washington Post the day before Yurchenko’s press conference. The Post story outlined a 29-page “vulnerability assessment” compiled by the CIA in 1984; the report concluded that Libyan dissidents “could be spurred to assassination attempts” on Kaddafi if he became entangled in some foreign adventure. The CIA proposed a broad campaign of covert political and paramilitary action in concert with unnamed third countries to bring that about—and the president, according to the Post, has already approved the plan. Last week Reagan ordered a full-bore investigation into the damaging leak, but the controversy is far from over.

Political Target: The bottom line on a turbulent week is that the CIA may become a political target again, much as it was in the 1970s, when liberals uncovered the dark secrets of its assassination attempts and domestic spying. Now, however, it is conservatives who are pushing the agency to get tough in the cold war against Soviet espionage—and the Yurchenko debacle may be just enough to give the hawks what they want, which is a selective purge within Casey’s senior staff. Even if such a shake-up could strengthen the CIA in the long run, it would almost certainly entail short-term trauma for the agency. And that may be why Yurchenko, leaving the State Department on the eve of his return to Moscow, clasped both hands above his head in a gesture of triumph.

TOM MORGANTHAU with KIM WILLENSON,
RICHARD SANDZA and JOHN WALCOTT
in Washington and bureau reports



BRUCE HOERTEL

Casey: A debacle—but how bad?