

Operation Dragon: Inside the Kremlin's Secret War on America

R. James Woolsey and Ion Mihail Pacepa (Encounter Books, 2021) 209 pages, notes, photos, index.

Reviewed by Graham Alexander

“For fifty-six years, most of the world has believed that President John F. Kennedy was murdered by America. . . . This is a lie, set off fifty-six years ago by the KGB’s worldwide disinformation campaign called ‘Operation Dragon.’” (127) Thus arrives perhaps *Operation Dragon*’s most widely trumpeted claim well over halfway through a brief polemic written by recently deceased Romanian defector Ion Mihail Pacepa and former CIA Director James Woolsey. *Operation Dragon* builds in this sense on Pacepa’s 2007 book *Programmed to Kill: Lee Harvey Oswald, the Kennedy Assassination and the KGB* in its attempt to summon often highly circumstantial evidence in support of a Nikita Khrushchev sponsored, KGB plot. Not content to stop there, the authors also borrow heavily from Pacepa’s other work while traipsing through a plethora of real, but sometimes highly dubious, examples of Russian and Soviet perfidy. The book suffers throughout from this pattern of speculative, deductive reasoning, one that summons data useful for the construction of a KGB assassination narrative at the expense of a more balanced, thoughtful assessment of the facts.

Contrary to press reports and even the book jacket’s claims, *Operation Dragon* is not a book especially focused on the Kennedy assassination. It is instead a near-relentless screed designed to illustrate the unsurpassed evil and treachery of Russia and the Soviet Union. This version of the assassination fits inside the book because it is perfectly in sync with the authors’ thesis. Arguments consistent with this view range far and wide across the historical spectrum in a confused, seemingly random litany. In one early passage, readers are treated to details, in order of appearance, on: the 2007 Romanian film *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*, Felix Dzerzhinsky’s support for Stalin after Lenin’s death, and Tsar Alexander II’s role in anti-Semitic pogroms. (18–21) Later, the book jumps from details on Ceausescu’s purges of the Politburo after Pacepa’s 1978 defection in one paragraph straight into a treatment of Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia (118).

The confused rush of ideas extends even beyond the writing style. For example, the author’s discussion of Oswald is sandwiched between standalone chapters on Mikhail Gorbachev’s use of *glasnost* to swindle the West and Soviet sponsorship of Yasser Arafat on both sides of the author’s discussion of Oswald. Factual errors arise with regrettable frequency. *Operation Dragon* claims, for example, that Stalin had Imre Nagy kidnapped and “hanged as a Jewish spy” (26), that the Kennedy assassination transpired on 20 November 1963, (82) and that the Soviets were “encouraged by the pact with Hitler” already in February 1939 and therefore decided to make public their plans to use bacteriological and chemical weapons. (173) Pacepa and Woolsey also advance highly questionable, conspiracy theory–style arguments unrelated to the assassination by suggesting, for example, that Ceausescu’s fall was the product of a Russian intelligence operation (101) or even that the Russians sponsored the 9/11 attacks. (119)

Pacepa and Woolsey craft their most coherent, though frustratingly disingenuous, argument when discussing the Kennedy assassination. Namely, they marshal circumstantial facts for their thesis while ignoring contrary details or dismissing them as disinformation. Numerous details long part of conspiracy literature are highlighted, Oswald’s two-month stint as a Marine at the U2 base in Atsugi, Japan; his use of firearms while living in Minsk; and his 1962 return to the United States with his Russian bride, Marina. The authors lean heavily on Oswald’s widely known relationship with Russian exile George de Mohrenschildt and his September 1963 travel to the Soviet embassy in Mexico City to suggest that he maintained an illicit relationship with Soviet intelligence. They claim that Oswald’s writings and documents contain hidden messages and thus prove he was actually a KGB trained assassin sent to the United States on a mission personally from Khrushchev because of the latter’s fury over the outcome of the Cuban missile crisis. Oswald’s communications with the Soviet embassy in Washington and his refusal to allow Marina to learn English are even

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cited as evidence that he planned to return to Soviet Union after the assassination.

Stated generously, such claims fare poorly upon cross examination. To cite just one example, President Kennedy did not decide to visit Dallas until November 1963, and the Secret Service did not finalize the president's route through Dallas until eight days before the trip. Any change in these plans would have prevented the KGB's supposed master marksman from taking the shot from the Dallas Book Depository, where he had obtained a job through a chance series of events in October 1963—before Kennedy scheduled his trip. The book completely ignores Oswald's mercurial personality, his overt

affiliation with left-wing causes, and his meager savings. Perhaps most incredibly, it spends a significant amount of time attempting to explain why, after the assassination, Soviet and Cuban surprise and eagerness to disassociate themselves were merely part of an elaborate ruse to transmit disinformation back through compromised FBI sources (144–52). With welcome recognition that intelligence assets are difficult to control or predict, Pacepa and Woolsey do allow that the KGB changed its mind and attempted to stop Oswald after sending him to the United States. Alas, it is the one time in *Operation Dragon* where they admit that even Russian intelligence sometimes faces limitations in its designs to control the world.



The reviewer: Graham Alexander is the pen name of a CIA Directorate of Operations officer currently assigned to the Center for the Study of Intelligence.