

A Defection Case that Marked the Times

John Tellaray, with an introduction by Michael Sulick

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In November 1989 the opening of the Berlin Wall heralded the end of the Soviet Union and the Cold War. Less well known is that this historic event also sparked the greatest wave of Soviet defectors in the history of the CIA and resulted in a windfall of intelligence on past and then on-going Soviet activities.

The fall of the Berlin Wall opened the floodgates to hundreds of Soviet citizens offering to trade secrets in return for an escape from their crumbling empire. In East Berlin alone, the CIA screened four Soviets a week to verify their claims of access to intelligence.^a To separate the wheat from the chaff, at one point the CIA set higher standards for contact with potential Soviet defectors and agents and even discouraged acceptance of some. The world, after all, was changing dramatically. The superpower conflict appeared to be fading into the past as the USSR disintegrated and a new era of cooperation seemed to be looming.

Harbingers of this new era were even evident between the CIA and the KGB, the two archrivals who

epitomized the Cold War conflict. The CIA director had quietly met with his opposite number in the KGB both in Washington and Moscow.^b Other senior Agency officials had also met with KGB counterparts, and the chief of the CIA's Soviet Division had a special telephone on his desk to communicate directly with the KGB.^c

The two former adversaries held discussions on cooperation regarding mutual threats of terrorism and proliferation. Prospects appeared even brighter after the August 1991 coup against Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev backfired. Just a few months after the coup, in response to a US request regarding the massive bugging of the US embassy in Moscow, the newly appointed reformist KGB director, Vadim Bakatin, passed to CIA the Soviet blueprints of the penetrated building.^d

During Bakatin's tenure, the monolithic KGB was disbanded and its extensive, sweeping powers were split among new external and internal intelligence services and other agencies. Perhaps a new era was truly dawning.

^a Milton Bearden and James Risen, *The Main Enemy: The Inside Story of the CIA's Final Showdown with the KGB* (New York: Ballantine, 2002), 432.

^b Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 424–26, 476–77.

^c Bearden and Risen, 363.

^d *Ibid.*, 369.

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Soviet defectors, however, told a different story. The story was sufficiently compelling that CIA Headquarters relaxed its restrictions on potential Soviet defectors and resettled over a dozen in the United States between 1989 and 1991 because of the value of the intelligence they provided.^a They came from many areas of US national security interest: military personnel, weapons scientists and, most especially, KGB officers.

The KGB was particularly shaken by the turmoil in the Soviet Union and was polarized over the dramatic changes introduced by Gorbachev. A younger generation, disillusioned by the corruption and hypocrisy of the KGB, welcomed the reforms, but their more traditionalist communist superiors struggled to preserve the status quo and still trumpeted the United States as the “main enemy” bent on destruction of the nation’s way of life. The biggest part of the flood of KGB defectors, not surprisingly, came from the younger generation, majors and colonels who remained unconvinced by the arguments of their seniors and the myths of the service’s past glory.

The story told by these defectors proved that the Soviet Union was changing less dramatically than indicated by Gorbachev’s supposed reforms. Defectors from the scientific community, such as Ken Alibek

and Vladimir Pasechnik, revealed that the Russians were still developing a biological warfare program in violation of international agreements. They were also still developing other weapons systems: a pilot passed the CIA information about the combat tactics of the air force’s most advanced fighter plane.^b

KGB defectors in turn revealed that the Moscow was still gathering secrets from spies in US government and industry and actively seeking new sources. Unfortunately, because of the KGB’s effective compartmentation, none of these defectors was privy to the most convincing proof of this, the Russians’ continued handling of CIA officer Rick Ames after the dissolution of the KGB until his arrest in 1994. The Russians also continued to collect information from FBI agent Robert Hanssen. The flood of defectors, however, may have stanchied the flow of secrets to Russia, since Hanssen—apparently afraid that one of them might compromise him—dropped contact with Russian intelligence for eight years.

One of these defectors was handled by John Tellaray, then a senior officer assigned to a capital abroad. His account below confirms that the KGB was not only actively recruiting US citizens to spy on the nation but had made significant progress in building networks in the US corpo-

rate sector. The information provided by the defector about this network augured an intensified effort by Russian intelligence to steal America’s economic and scientific secrets which continues today. The development, of course, should not be surprising—one of the young officers who embraced the views of KGB hardliners during the Gorbachev era, Vladimir Putin, is now the president of the Russian Federation for a second time and an enthusiastic supporter of the Russian intelligence services.

Tellaray’s account also demonstrates that one other key aspect of intelligence remained immutable despite the dramatic changes affecting the CIA and KGB in the final years of the Cold War—the complex, often frustrating relationship between case officer and source. Each of the many Soviet defectors in that period was unique; each had his own demands, expectations, fears and eccentricities. These relationships required the skills of a professional intelligence officer to ensure the security of the source, to praise them when they were productive and prod them when they were not. As evidenced in his account below, John Tellaray embodies the professionalism that resulted in an intelligence treasure trove from the host of Soviet defectors in the final stages and immediate aftermath of the Cold War.



Watching my rearview mirror for surveillance, I veered from the high-speed lane onto the exit ramp, made a right at the first intersection and stepped on the gas. The precautions were needed, even in a friendly

country, because the director of its security service had vowed to use any excuse to throw a senior CIA officer out of his country. Indeed, five minutes into our first meeting, he accused the Agency of a political

assassination that had taken place before my arrival. Still, the threat to me was minimal compared to the risk the KGB officer I was driving to meet was taking. If compromised in a private engagement with me, he

^a Ibid., 464.

^b Ibid., 433.

would be returned to Russia and executed. For that reason, I knew he was taking similar precautions.

The officer had approached me the previous Sunday as I was opening the gate to my driveway to drive my car into the courtyard. We had never met but we knew of each other. I will call him Nikolai. Wasting no time, he demanded that he and his family be put on the next plane to the United States. He was defecting.

He and I immediately became engaged in a battle of wills. We were professional intelligence officers working for enemy services and each of us had a mutually exclusive goal. He had been agonizing over this life-changing move for months. As he stressed during our initial meetings, having personal knowledge of KGB colleagues who had been executed in unsuccessful attempts to do what he was doing, he knew he was taking his life in his hands. He had made up his mind, convinced his wife, and all he wanted from me was a new life in the United States, starting tomorrow! He would reveal his information only after arriving in the United States and obtaining a commitment of resettlement from the CIA.

My mission was to assess his credibility and his value before I put him on a plane. What I didn't anticipate was that it would be just as difficult to convince Langley to pay attention as it would be to convince Nikolai to defect my way.

Saying he was sure my house was bugged by the host country's security service, Nikolai refused to come into my house. Instead, our first meeting was a two hour walk in the nearby woods. It was drizzling, but neither of us noticed. He insisted at each subsequent meeting that he

would terminate our contact unless I could give him Washington's answer immediately. Keeping him from bolting was my first priority, and I measured progress by cups of coffee or bottles of beer. My goal was to obtain information on the KGB's secret plans and intentions, starting with threats against US interests, as well as any insights into what was going on in the Kremlin. The Berlin Wall had fallen, and his country was undergoing wrenching changes.

"I know what you are doing," he would say, as his eyes burned with anger and frustration. "But I will never be your agent!"

Initially, CIA Headquarters was not anymore interested in my plan than was Nikolai. There was a school of thought at Langley that, since the Cold War was over, a KGB officer was not any more valuable to the CIA than a foreign taxi driver. However, there was a noticeable change in attitude when I began sending reports to Washington on topics that were clearly of immediate importance.

Adding to Nikolai's tension was his teenage daughter who couldn't wait to return to her friends in Moscow. Neither he nor his wife had shared their plans with her because they feared what her reaction might be.

One night we were meeting in a café two hours outside the capital. As usual, he was irritated and upset that I could not give him a positive answer. Although he had frequently threatened to walk out, this time he got up and walked to the front door, where I caught up with him. Nikolai was a decorated officer, more used to giving orders than to taking them, and he had felt thwarted and exasperated from the outset.

As he was starting to open the door to the street, I asked him, "How long have we been meeting? What would happen if your service discovered that you were meeting with the CIA? Now tell me this. What have you achieved from taking this chance?"

With his hand still on the door, Nikolai looked through the glass out to the dark street beyond, and then looked at me. "We are almost there," I said. "Your risk is about to pay off. You would make a big mistake if you walked out that door. You have put yourself and your family in danger and so far have gotten nothing in return."

I put my hand on his elbow to guide him back to our table. All of a sudden Nikolai's body language underwent a metamorphosis. His shoulders drooped, his eyes teared up and he looked down. His confidence and feistiness disappeared, acceptance set in.

That meeting was a watershed in our relationship. Whereas I had elicited reportable information from him before, he became a cooperative partner in that café. Our meetings became more frequent and he raised the bar, handing over top-secret KGB documents. Doing so required him to take great risks, day and night. Eventually, after a final, difficult and most fruitful effort, I could tell him that he and his family would be on the next available flight to the United States.

During the last days of the operation, I had two worries. First, that his daughter might blow the whistle wittingly, or unwittingly, and send her father to Lubyanka. Further, I did not want to take the chance that he and his family would come under suspicion by either the local security service, which knew Nikolai to be a

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KGB officer, or by his own KGB colleagues during the exfiltration.

Once we decided on a date of departure, Nikolai and I thought that the best plan would be to tell his daughter they were going for a weekend trip and that she should pack lightly for one or two nights away from home. At the airport he would explain to her that they were all going to the United States because he was being assigned temporarily to New York. I also spent a little money to buy his daughter an electronic game to keep her mind occupied on the flight. A couple of months after the family's arrival in the United States, the daughter was attending high school. She had not then been told that the move was permanent.

I had not shared the information that Nikolai was defecting with the local security service primarily because I was not confident the information would not reach the KGB. If this liaison service learned that Nikolai and his family were planning to travel to the United States from its international airport, or if it learned of the travel after the fact, the chief of the service, having

already tried to PNG me, would assume the existence of another CIA conspiracy.

But good tradecraft had deprived the chief of any proof and both the foreign minister and the minister of justice had turned him down. I therefore made arrangements, with the help of a neighboring station, to fly Nikolai and his family out of another country.

We waited until Nikolai was in the air before turning information about him over to the local liaison service. In order to downplay the case, we shared it with a midlevel official whose career we wanted to boost. There were arrests made and I moved on to another assignment and lost track of the case. Back in the United States, we debriefed Nikolai extensively. The information produced hundreds of reports and led to shutting down several KGB networks in America and abroad.

Many years later I met the CIA officer responsible for Nikolai's resettlement. He informed me that Nikolai had worked in the security department of a private company for a brief period, but it had not worked

out and he had been on his own ever since. He also gave me Nikolai's phone number and suggested that I call him. Nikolai's handler assured me that, although Nikolai had characterized our relationship as "highly intense," he had high professional respect for me.

I left the phone number on my desk for over a month, wary of getting involved with a defector's problems. However, I did call him and he caught me up on some of his personal life since arriving in the States. He told me that to augment his CIA stipend, he had become a day trader in the stock market, working from home. I asked about his daughter, but learned nothing except that she was "fine." He seemed to be modestly successful.

While Nikolai said that he welcomed my call, like the intelligence officer that he had been, he did not volunteer answers to questions I did not ask. He didn't seem to regret forgoing the dacha that he had assured me, during our pre-exfiltration fencing, that his rank and party standing would have netted him had he returned to Moscow.

