

Russia and The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy

by Michael Curtis



Who killed President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963?

Why was he killed? The puzzle about the mysterious assassination of the President and the exact nature of the events connected to it remains fascinating even if it does not have the tension of a suspense thriller. What is troubling is that at the center of the continuing unwillingness to accept a definitive explanation of the event is the allegation that American authorities have not divulged the full truth of events, especially in documents issued by intelligence agencies adept at deception.

This anxiety may be assuaged if the National Archives makes publicly available the documents in its possession. In 1992 the U.S. Congress enacted that all assassination-related material be housed in a collection in the National Archives.

President Donald Trump pledged to order the release of the documents. In April 2018 some 19,045 documents were released, but 15,584 were withheld for various reasons, protection against harm to national security, law enforcement, or foreign policy. The documents are supposed to be fully classified by October 26, 2021.

In the meantime, the different versions of responsibility for the assassination continue. The first answer came in the 1964 report from the prestigious group chaired by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy, the Warren Commission, which had been created by an executive order of President Lynton B. Johnson. Its main conclusion was that the President had been killed by one man, Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, from the 6th floor window of the Texas Book Depository Building in Dallas. In addition, it stated that Oswald was murdered two days later, November 24, 1963, by Jack Ruby, a night club owner, at the Police Headquarters in Dallas, with a single shot from a revolver, apparently in an act of spontaneous revenge. Ruby's motive was never exactly clear: he said at different times, he was saving Mrs. Kennedy from the unpleasantness of having to attend a trial, he was enraged and in a temporary fit of depression at Kennedy's murder. Ruby was arrested, found guilty of murder and sentenced to death, appealed and won a retrial but died in prison before it could be held. An undistinguished figure, one with links to organize crime, Ruby is no longer of historical or political interest.

But Oswald, equally undistinguished, is of interest. Born in New Orleans in 1939 he had a troubled youth. At 17 he joined the U.S. Marines, taught himself Russian, was court martialed, and discharged in September 1959. He then went to the Soviet Union where he told officials he wanted to become a Soviet citizen, and married a Russian woman. In June 1962 he returned with his wife to the U.S. Oswald worked at various jobs. In March 1963 he bought a Carcano rifle, which was found at the

Depository, and a Smith and Wesson revolver. He tried in April 1963 to use the rifle to kill retired, anti-communist, far right, General Edwin Walker.

For a time, Oswald opened an office in New Orleans as the headquarters of a group, Fair Play for Cuba. He returned to Dallas and got a job at the book Depository.

The 888-page Warren Report held that there was no evidence that either Oswald or Ruby was part of any conspiracy, domestic or foreign. There was no evidence that anyone assisted Oswald in planning or carrying out the assassination, or that he was involved in any conspiracy. He acted alone and the clue to his motives may be found in his personal history. The Report could not make any definitive determination of Oswald's motives: factors might include his deep-rooted resentment of all authority, his urge to find a place in history, his capacity for violence, and his avowed commitment to Marxism and communism, as he understood them.

Since the Report, alternative statements, conspiracy theories, stories of clandestine government plans, murder plots, have been proposed featuring different scenarios and different individuals. Moscow actively disseminated Fake News that Kennedy had been killed by the CIA. One result of this disinformation was a book, *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?* by a German born American communist, Joachim Joesten, which claimed that Oswald was an FBI agent provocateur with a CIA background. In this tale Oswald was the fall guy for the real villains who included some officials of the CIA and FBI and "reactionary oil billionaires such as H. L. Hunt." Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgment* disputed the conclusions of Warren. Jim Garrison in *On the Trail of the Assassins*, and Oliver Stone in his movie *JFK* argued that a conspiracy was involved and included the CIA. For them Warren was a fictional myth.

Almost everything was disputed: the arguments that Kennedy was shot not from the Depository building but from the grassy

knoll in front of him; differences over the number of bullets that were fired; and the number of gunmen. The roll of suspects varied: the CIA, former CIA director Allen Dulles, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, CIA counter-intelligence chief James Angleton who feared the infiltration by the Soviet Union, of U.S. intelligence operations the KGB, the Mafia, LBJ, Chicago mobster Johnny Roselli, Joe DiMaggio because of the alleged affair between JFK and Marilyn Monroe, Fidel Castro, but also anti- Castro Cuban exiles.

Because of all the allegations, in 1978 the U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations issued its findings. It stated that Oswald fired three shots at Kennedy. But it also said there was a high probability that two gunmen had fired. It believed that the President was probably assassinated as the result of a conspiracy, though it was unable to identify the gunmen other than Oswald or the extent of the conspiracy. It asserted that Warren had conducted a thorough and reliable investigation of Oswald but not the possibility of conspiracy in the assassination. However, the Committee while asserting probable assassination, did not believe that the Soviet government, or the Cuban government, or anti-Castro Cuban groups, or the national syndicate of organized crime was responsible. The mystery remained, who was responsible?

Now comes the latest view presented in a new book *Operation Dragon: Inside the Kremlin's Secret War on America*, written by R. James Woolsey, former CIA director, 1993-95, and Ion Mihai Pacepa, former two-star general in the secret police force in Communist Romania and national security adviser to President Nicolae Ceausecu. Papeca who defected to the U.S. in 1978 died on February 14, 2021, was the highest intelligence officer who defected and got asylum in the U.S.

This new book amplifies the argument already made by Papeca in his previous book *Programmed to Kill: Oswald, the KGB, and the Kennedy Assassination*, published in 2007, which argued that Oswald was a KGB agent. The authors say they based their

argument on the Warren Report, state that much of it was "codified" and that it has not been properly understood until their version. The essential thrust in *Operation Dragon* is that the assassination was carried out by Oswald who had been ordered by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev acting through the KGB, now the FSB. Khrushchev, who thought JFK was inexperienced and could be manipulated, had differed with, perhaps humiliated by, Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis, but reached an agreement on October 28, 1962 according to which the Soviet Union would remove its missiles from Cuba if the U.S. removed its missiles from Turkey.

The story in *OD* is that Oswald was recruited as a Soviet agent in 1957 when he was a marine stationed in Japan. He provided information that allowed the Soviet Union to shoot down the U-2 spy plane of Gary Powers in May 1960. In 1962 Oswald was told by the KGB on behalf of Khrushchev to prepare to assassinate Kennedy. He was trained by the KGB but the Soviet leaders changed their mind, believing that Khrushchev had crazy ideas, and that his behavior might lead to a nuclear war, and canceled the mission. However, Oswald went ahead on his own to carry out the assassination on what he considered a personal mission. He had a clandestine meeting in Mexico City with Comrade Kostin, Valery Kostikov, a PGU officer of the 13th Department, the group in charge of overseas assassinations. It is pertinent to consider that two KGB officers met a few cases before the assassination: one of them was the head of the 13th Department. Oswald met on September 27, 1963 with the Soviet and Cuban consulates in the City. Oswald was making plans to flee to the Soviet Union after the assassination. In a letter of July 1, 1963 Oswald asked the Soviet Embassy for separate visas for himself and his wife and daughters, so that the family could leave for the Soviet Union before the assassination.

OD suggests that Warren Commission did not use much of the intelligence because they did not want to go to war with the

Soviet Union and the investigation was poorly done. The debate over Warren's conclusion that Oswald acted alone continues. However, it is surprising that most Americans have refused to accept that conclusion. In 2003 three quarters of Americans thought more than one man was involved, and in 2013, the number was still 61%. It may not be a driving event in American history, but it is important in this era of Russian disinformation to examine allegations of a covert war waged by the Kremlin in the past.

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