

CIA AND THE PENKOVSKY AFFAIR

"A New Disservice for All Concerned"

Paul W. Blackstock

In an enlightened foreword to the October 1963 issue of *Holiday Magazine*, an issue devoted entirely to Russia, the editors observed that "there is a constant pressure here by a loud and rabid minority, including many in high places, who want no words said or written about Russia unless they are loaded with hate and provocation."

The editors could hardly have foreseen that some two years later, under C.I.A. auspices, the American public would be exposed to the so-called *Penkovsky Papers* (Doubleday, 411 pp., \$5.95), a book which is literally "loaded with hate and provocation" and which unfortunately became a best-seller overnight. The book's appearance at a time when U.S.-Soviet relations were already strained over the muddled situation in Vietnam may be purely accidental or it may be simply another case of "the right hand of government not knowing what the left is doing" as was amply illustrated in *The Invisible Government*.

But since the leaders in the Kremlin exercise close supervision over all Soviet publishing, and presumably even tighter control over the "disinformation" operations of their own intelligence agencies, they are not likely to be impressed by bland disavowals that the U.S. Government was not directly involved in the publication of the *Penkovsky Papers*. Their natural suspicions would be supported by Victor Zorza, the British Soviet expert, who has stated flatly that "the book could have been compiled only by the Central Intelligence Agency." Zorza argues persuasively that "no other organization in the West, apart from British Intelligence, and certainly no individual, could have had access to the information of which the book is made up. British Intelligence officers did at one time entertain the idea of building Penkovsky up posthumously as something of a hero, but permission to proceed was withheld."

Obviously, in the case of the C.I.A. and the *Pen-*

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kovsky Papers, either permission to publish was not withheld or publication was actually a *fait accompli* to which the State Department had to adjust after the fact.

In any case, the Penkovsky incident is another illustration of the maxim that covert operational agencies can create situations to which national policy must be readjusted, frequently under crisis conditions. Compared to other incidents, the Penkovsky affair is a very tame tempest in a teapot. Nevertheless, the Soviet Foreign Ministry charged the *Washington Post*, which had published the articles in serial form, with engaging in "an anti-Soviet campaign around the Penkovsky Papers" and branded their publication as "an intentional act in the worst tradition of the cold war." In addition, the *Post's* able Moscow correspondent, Stephen S. Rosenfield, was summarily expelled from Moscow.

The Penkovsky "memoirs" undoubtedly struck a sensitive Soviet nerve and produced a hasty, ill-considered response far out of proportion to the actual stimulus. This sensitivity becomes more understandable, however, if one considers the background of the incident. For the *Penkovsky Papers* are only the most recent in a long series of false and lurid "memoirs" written by Russian émigrés and, since World War II, by defectors from the USSR or from the East European satellite states. Some of these memoirs have been based on a substratum of truth or personal experience, others have been made up out of whole cloth. Almost all have contained a generous admixture of either pro- or anti-Soviet propaganda.

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Since the Bolshevik seizure of power in November 1917, Paris has probably had the largest colony of "professional" Russian émigrés; in the post-revolutionary decade it was a seedbed of counter-revolutionary intrigue conducted by the intelligence agencies of the Allied Powers. (This clandestine warfare has recently been described in a semi-documentary historical novel, *Mertvaya Zyb*, by Lev Nikulin in the Soviet literary journal *Moskva* for May-June

1965.) However, these early Paris-based political warfare activities were effectively neutralized by Soviet counter-intelligence through a cover organization known as "the Trust" in one of the most successful penetration operations in modern history. Active sabotage and terror were reduced to a "dead shell" (the title of Nikulin's novel) and gave way to less spectacular forms of persuasion—mainly propaganda, including the widespread use of frauds and forgeries. The latter include the famous English Zinoviev letter which contributed to the defeat of MacDonald's Labor Party in the 1924 elections and set back the normalization of Anglo-Soviet relations by at least five years.

In this same tradition a small group of private forgers in Paris have been busily producing a spate of false Soviet memoirs since the early 1950's. This group of "historians," known as "the Bessedovsky school" after Gregory Bessedovsky, its self-acknowledged leader, has produced an astonishing number of false Soviet memoirs, biographies, etc. These have been so skillfully fabricated that even such Sovietologists as Isaac Deutscher and the British historian, E. H. Carr, have been deceived by them.

In an amazingly frank letter to Rysard Wraga, a Polish émigré then living in Paris, Mr. Bessedovsky once defended his trade of "falsifier of history" as follows:

As for myself, sir, I write books for idiots. Do you imagine that anyone in the West would read what you call my apocryphal works if, in quoting Kaganovitch, Zhukov, Mikoyan or Bulganin, I tried to be faithful to the manner, sense and form of their speeches? . . . But when I portray Stalin or Molotov in pyjamas, when I tell the dirtiest possible stories about them—never mind whether they are true or invented—rest assured that not only all intellectuals will read me, but also the most important capitalist statesman, on his way to a peace conference, will pick up my book before going to sleep in his pullman. . . . Allah has given money to the stupid in order that the intelligent can live easily.

Formerly a chargé d'affaires at the Soviet Embassy in Paris, Bessedovsky became one of the early Russian defectors by dramatically jumping over the Embassy wall (or fence) in October 1929. Within two years he had produced two volumes of memoirs, *On the Road to Thermidor: Memoirs of a Former Soviet Diplomat*. However, it was not until the outbreak of the cold war in the fall of 1947 that there began to appear in Paris a whole series of fraudulent

works which have since been ascribed to Bessedovsky. The first of these was the false memoir of General Vlassov, the brilliant Soviet commander who, taken prisoner by the Germans, fought on the German side during World War II and liberated Prague, only to be turned over later to the Soviets by the United States occupation forces. The book appeared under the pen name, Cyrille Dimitrievitch Kalinov, with the title, *I Chose the Gallows* (Paris, 1947). Other books attributed to Bessedovsky include *My Career as a Soviet Staff Officer*, *The Soviet Marshals Speak*, *My Uncle Joseph Stalin* and *Conversations with Stalin*. (The last two were supposedly written by an imaginary nephew, Budu Svanidze.) However, Bessedovsky's most famous coup was undoubtedly the fabrication of the purported diaries of Maxim Litvinov, Soviet Foreign Minister from 1930 to 1939. These were launched in England with an introductory essay by the distinguished British historian E. H. Carr under the title, *Notes for a Journal* (London, 1955). A later American edition was published with a preface by General Walter Bedell Smith, a former Director of C.I.A. and at the time an Under-Secretary of State in the first Eisenhower Administration.

Since 1955 Bessedovsky's pen and imagination have apparently been inactive. But his place has been taken by a gifted pupil of the same school, Victor Alexandrov. Alexandrov's literary production, like that of his model, has been prodigious (fourteen books), has had wide commercial success, and has served to further confuse fact with fantasy in the area of Soviet affairs. He frequently cites Bessedovsky as a source and flattering praises of his patron saint are scattered through his works.

Boris Souvarine, a Russian émigré who has written a highly critical biography of Stalin and who for years has conducted an effective anti-Communist propaganda campaign in Paris, evaluates the role which the "Bessedovsky school" has played in the cold war as follows:

If the fabrication factory, Bessedovsky, Alexandrov and Company, were motivated only by commercial considerations, no great harm would be done. But these imposters do not lie by chance, and in fabricating what Bessedovsky has called "books for idiots" they observe one invariable rule: Never attack the Soviet Union and always present the masters of the Kremlin in a sympathetic and favorable light.

On the other hand, the spate of "now-it-can-be-told" books produced by Soviet defectors (of which

the *Penkovsky Papers* is the latest) has more than offset this cold-war heritage of pro-Soviet memoirs. Like their pro-Communist counterparts these anti-Communist propaganda pieces follow the same rule in reverse: Always attack the Soviet Union and always present the masters of the Kremlin (or their satellite equivalents) in the most unsympathetic and unfavorable light.

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This propaganda pitch characterizes most anti-Soviet propaganda, but in the case of the *Penkovsky Papers*, reaches extremes which are grotesque. The entire political and military elite of a society which prides itself (rightly or wrongly) on high standards of "Socialist morality" is condemned as a collection of moral degenerates. The picture is all black and white, and there are no exceptions. After writing that he had "intentionally omitted the subject of moral degradation and drunkenness among the top military personnel—because there are already too many dirty stories on this subject"—Penkovsky proceeds to describe drunken orgies of the military elite and overprivileged "Golden Youth." After this extended walk on the seamy side of Soviet life he makes the absurd statement: "I know one thing for sure, though: all our generals have mistresses and some have two or more."

The USSR has every right to protest that this kind of offensive muckraking is "in the worst traditions of the cold war." Moreover, the *Penkovsky Papers* come at a time when the Soviets have been giving the West in general and the U.S. in particular "a good press," so far as the portrayal of Western society is concerned. Viktor Nekrassov's remarkably objective article on the U.S., "Both Sides of the Ocean," was published in *Novy Mir* (December 1962), the outstanding Soviet literary journal. It created a sensation in the USSR. The fact that it was denounced by Khrushchev only increased its appeal (like banning a book in Boston in the U.S.), and Nekrasov has defiantly continued writing. Again, in July 1964, *Novy Mir* published three sympathetic sketches of life in New York, New Orleans and Chicago ("Iz Amerikanskix Vstrech") by Vera Panova. Even Lev Nikulin, an old-line Party stalwart, has published three lightly amusing "Short Stories from the 'Free' World" (*Oktyabr*, November 1964).

The scholar and historian also have every right to protest against the essential dishonesty of the *Penkovsky Papers*, with respect to format as well as content, especially since the materials on which they are based were provided by the C.I.A. Let us review briefly the evidence concerning the origin of the

book before considering the moral problem raised by the dissemination of such officially sanctioned propaganda within a democratic society.

In the early 1960's the intelligence services of both the U.S. and USSR began to make increasing use of frauds, forgeries and fabrications for political warfare and propaganda purposes. Both sides in this competition used the term "disinformation" to describe such activities. For example, even before the appearance of the *Penkovsky Papers*, Soviet Premier Kosygin charged that "the imperialist intelligence services use disinformation, slander, blackmail and other provocations, hoping to cause discord between the Socialist countries. They seek all possible ways to get the Socialist countries against each other, and to tear at least some of them away from the Socialist family."

For its part, the C.I.A. had published in the Congressional Record its own study of "The Soviet and Communist Bloc Defamation Campaign" (September 28, 1965). Presumably to add support to this theoretical analysis and to score a number of political warfare points, the controversial *Penkovsky Papers* were published simultaneously in both England and the U.S. with sensational advance publicity—including lengthy excerpts in the *London Observer*, the *Washington Post*, and some thirty additional newspapers.

On May 16, 1963, after a highly-publicized show-trial, the USSR executed Soviet Colonel Oleg V. Penkovsky, who had reportedly provided U.S. and British Intelligence with important military-scientific information over a two-year period. Colonel Penkovsky is a classic example of the "defector in place." This kind of defector is a subverted individual, who remains in place and faithfully serves a foreign power. He is far more dangerous and valuable than one who is forced to flee (when threatened by imminent exposure and arrest) or who defects for other more immediate personal reasons, such as escape from a nagging wife, mistress, or plant supervisor. The "defector in place" stays on the job but reports regularly to a controlling agency, or agencies—in the case of Penkovsky, the C.I.A. and British Intelligence.

During his two years of active espionage for C.I.A. and British Intelligence, Penkovsky passed some 5,000 microfilm photographs of documents, sketches, etc. taken with a miniature camera. During extensive taped interviews in London and Paris he also provided much additional information and reports. This material was screened (for security purposes) and passed through official channels to Mr. Frank Gibney, the editor of the *Papers*, and Peter

Deriabin, himself a former officer in the Soviet Security Forces, who defected to America in 1954. Selections from this material were then published as Penkovsky's personal journal. The editors claim that the *Penkovsky Papers* consist of "hastily written notes, sketches and comments" which Penkovsky wrote and kept in a secret hiding place in his two-room apartment, and supposedly smuggled out of the Soviet Union about the time of his arrest in the autumn of 1962. It was precisely at this time that Penkovsky was under such heavy surveillance that on some occasions he found it impossible to transmit vital military intelligence reports on tiny rolls of microfilm. Under these circumstances it would appear to be highly unlikely, though not impossible, that Penkovsky did in fact succeed in transmitting the bulky *Papers* (and accompanying material). But why should a skilled espionage agent who knew that he was under heavy surveillance risk detection by passing a lot of family pictures, Communist Party membership cards and other personal trivia which he could easily have transmitted two years earlier with little or no risk?

Because of the phony, glamorized cover story concerning their origin, but also due to their internal style and to certain errors of fact in the *Penkovsky Papers*, Victor Zorza and other Soviet experts have labelled them as at least a "partial forgery." Mr. Zorza regretfully observes:

The C.I.A. has been repeatedly stung and provoked by the attempts of the Disinformation Department of the Soviet intelligence organization to discredit its activities throughout the world. The *Penkovsky Papers* are the C.I.A.'s answer. But in psychological warfare of this kind the intelligence agencies of the democratic countries suffer from the grave disadvantage that in attempting to damage the adversary they must also deceive their own public. It is the function of a free press to uncover such deception. Some of my best friends are in the C.I.A., but if they want their psychological warfare efforts to remain undiscovered, they must do better than this.

A technical analysis of the authenticity of the *Penkovsky Papers* is beyond the scope of this article. It is enough to state that Zorza's case is well-founded and that the *Papers* are clearly not what they are represented to be, a personal memoir or "testament." This does not mean, as Soviet sources claim, that the book is "a clumsy forgery" or "a complete fabrication from beginning to end." Far from being "a clumsy forgery" the *Penkovsky Papers* appear to be a mixture of his own reports and other materials

skillfully selected for political warfare purposes. In Victor Zorza's words, "much of the book seems calculated to show the Soviet system in the worst possible light." The sensational publicity aroused by the publication of the book demonstrates that the editorial format (presenting the *Papers* as a "secret journal") was a shrewd merchandising device well calculated to exploit the public taste for muckraking.

Except in terms of length and format, the *Papers* do not differ materially from the series of scholarly reports, "The Soviet Bloc As Reported by Former Nations," published by the State Department after careful screening to protect the identity of the source. Each of these "Interview Reports" is prefaced by the statement, "The material in this series . . . is released by the Department of State in order to make available to students of Soviet affairs basic data for their research from sources not readily accessible." Why did the editors choose the dubious format of a "secret journal" rather than a straightforward scholarly presentation of these materials? It would appear that the old Army motto, "Stop! There must be a harder way!" has been converted by Merchants of Deception into "Stop! There must be a more devious way!" Surely Penkovsky, who knowingly died for his convictions, deserves better than this from those who profited by his legacy.

By means of a balanced, book-length supplement to this scholarly series, the so-called "Penkovsky legacy" of interviews and related materials could have been presented as an unimpeachable historical source. Instead the editors of the *Papers* published them in a form which at once aroused grave doubts about their authenticity. Moreover, both in tone and content, the book is almost totally lacking in balance. Like many other defectors, Penkovsky paints a very dark picture of the Soviet state and society in order to rationalize his defection and to justify such an irreversible step to his conscience. The image of Soviet life presented does not differ materially from that of Stalinist Russia at its worst—as if time had literally stood still for the last decade or more. After the first trauma has been overcome, most defectors introduce a certain balance in their writing. The reader of the *Penkovsky Papers*, however, is left with the impression that either the author never got beyond the initial stage of overcompensation in his reporting or that only the grotesque exaggerations of his early reports were selected for publication by his editors.

The same kind of bias characterizes the material selected on military affairs. The Soviet military es-

tablishment is presented as working almost exclusively to prepare a devastating first strike with nuclear weapons against the United States. The impression is left that Soviet military strategists are irrevocably committed to the doctrine of preventive war and to an unlimited arms race. The partial nuclear test ban treaty and Soviet concern with arms limitation and control have already demonstrated the imbalance of such views. Indeed, the reader may seriously question whether in fact Penkovsky with his scientific background reported on Soviet military affairs in such a one-sided manner, as if his main concern were to provide ready-made ammunition for hard-line propagandists in the West. Thus not only because of the private journal format, but also due to the selection of materials, the *Penkovsky Papers* must be regarded as a self-serving political warfare vehicle rather than as a valid historical source.

With the notable exception of Allen Dulles' *The Craft of Intelligence*, the C.I.A. has been getting a bad press in recent years, and the *Penkovsky Papers* may have been launched in part to help restore the Agency's somewhat tarnished image. As a former intelligence aide, I can only sympathize with this understandable objective. In the foreword to *The Strategy of Subversion*, I described the Agency's perennial problem in this regard in these terms: "In recurrent crises the C.I.A. often becomes a sort of lightning rod which draws off the electricity generated by criticism of national policy in complex and frequently confused situations. Because of the rules of the game the agency cannot openly defend itself and frequently becomes the target of well-meaning but only partially informed criticism." However, the publication of lurid, heavily biased espionage "re-

velations" is not an effective way of improving the C.I.A. image, and the Agency's role in providing the raw material for the *Penkovsky Papers* cannot be plausibly denied. Therefore, Professor Samuel Sharp's criticism of the *Washington Post* for having printed the *Papers* in serial form ("not the best way of discharging the precious responsibilities of a free press") is doubly applicable to the Government agency indirectly responsible.

Not only Penkovsky, who cannot complain, but also the American public, has a right to demand a better presentation of the Penkovsky legacy than this repellent "substandard forgery," which is not only in bad taste, but apparently violates a long-standing ground rule of U.S.-Soviet relations.

During the Classic Cold War Period (1947) both sides in the cold war heaped abuse on each other without restraint. From the death of Stalin (1953) throughout the Khrushchev era, both sides have sought to reduce tensions (with notable lapses into brinkmanship), and by mutual, unwritten agreement, have exercised considerable restraint in propaganda exchanges. The Soviets have constantly and repeatedly emphasized that "there can be no peaceful coexistence in the realm of ideology." Nevertheless, over the last five years the Soviets have as a rule projected a far more favorable image of the U.S. than the distorted picture of the Soviet military-political elite reflected in the *Penkovsky Papers*. Soviet protests that the book is "in the worst traditions of the cold war" are fully justified. Its publication thus opens the way for another round of mutual recriminations and distorted propaganda exchanges. One may seriously question whether opening the door to renewal of such vilification is in the national interest.

Nuclear Weapons:

CAN THEIR SPREAD BE HALTED?

by

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