

Penkovsky: Genuine Defector Turned Unwitting Soviet Agent of Disinformation

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Introduction

When Colonel Oleg Penkovsky approached two American tourists on the Moskvoretsky Bridge in Moscow on August 12, 1960 and attempted to defect to the West, he revitalized American prospects in the Cold War. As a senior military intelligence officer, he was able to provide the American intelligence community with top-secret information on Soviet missiles and politics, allowing the United States to determine that the U.S.-Soviet missile gap was in its favor, discern Khrushchev's intentions in Berlin, and identify Soviet missiles in Cuba. However, while Penkovsky's contributions to American foreign policy are extensive, his treason did not remain undetected until his arrest on October 22, 1962. Instead, a mole in the upper echelons of American or British intelligence alerted the KGB to Penkovsky's efforts in the spring of 1961, allowing the KGB to transform Penkovsky from a genuine defector to an unwitting Soviet agent of disinformation.

Penkovsky's Early Life

Born on April 23, 1919 in the Caucasian city of Ordzhonikidze,¹ Penkovsky came from an upper-middle-class

¹ Gordon Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Birds* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), 170.

professional family that had prospered in the service of the tsar.² His grandfather was a respected judge in Stavropol while his father was a mining engineer who rose to become a first lieutenant in the White Army before his disappearance in 1919.³ As a result of his pre-revolutionary upper-class heritage,⁴ Penkovsky committed to the Communist cause at a young age in order to survive.⁵ He became the model of Communist orthodoxy, joining both the army and the Komsomol youth movement after his eighteenth birthday and attaining Communist party membership three years later, in 1940.⁶

After joining the military, Penkovsky became consumed with the progression of his career.⁷ During World War II, he served as a political officer for four years⁸ and then assumed command of an artillery regiment in the First Ukrainian Army Front in 1943 when he realized that he had “no distinctions or decorations” from the war.⁹ Through his service in the artillery regiment and calculated acts of kindness, Penkovsky became a confidant and protégé of Chief Marshal of Soviet Artillery, Sergei Varentsov.¹⁰ This relationship would serve him well throughout his career, endowing him with both a loyal patron and access to Moscow’s best social circles.

After the war, Penkovsky married Vera Dmitriyeva Gapanovich, the daughter of General Gapanovich, a Red Army general who rose to be a member of the Military Council and the Chief Political Officer for the Moscow Military District.¹¹ While the marriage was in part driven by Gapanovich’s beauty, Penkovsky largely pursued the marriage in order to access General

² Ibid.

³ Peter Deriabin and Jerrold Schecter, *The Spy Who Saved the World* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1992), 50, 51.

⁴ John Hart, *The CIA’s Russians* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2003), 58.

⁵ Deriabin and Schecter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 52.

⁶ Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Birds*, 171.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ CIA, “Meeting #1 (LONDON),” April 20, 1961, FOIA No. 0000012392, 5.

¹⁰ Len Scott, “Espionage and the Cold War: Oleg Penkovsky and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Intelligence and National Security* (September 1999), 26.

¹¹ CIA, “Meeting #1 (LONDON),” 5.

Gapanovich's excellent Party contacts.¹² Following his marriage, he enrolled in the Frunze Military Academy from 1945 to 1948 through the help of Marshal Varentsov.¹³ In 1949, after spending a year in various staff positions at the suggestion of his father-in-law, Penkovsky entered the Military Diplomatic Academy, the acknowledged training school for intelligence officers.¹⁴ Promoted to colonel during his first year at the academy at age thirty,¹⁵ Penkovsky was assigned to the Glavnoe Razvedyvatelnoe Upravlenie (GRU), the Chief Intelligence Directorate of the Soviet General Staff, on completion¹⁶ and spent the following eighteen months in the GRU's Fourth Directorate on Near East issues.¹⁷

The Decline of Penkovsky's Career

Upon emerging from the Military Diplomatic Academy, Penkovsky's future in the Communist world appeared bright. Well-educated and supported by the upper echelons of the Communist party, his ascent appeared limitless. However, a miscalculation during an assignment in Turkey would derail his career and catalyze his fall from grace. After serving as assistant military attaché and acting rezident in Ankara, Turkey for a year, Penkovsky was replaced by Major General Savchenko in January 1956 and forced into subordination.¹⁸ Disgruntled by his subordination and disconcerted by Savchenko's crude operational methods, Penkovsky sent an official cable of complaint to Moscow through KGB channels alleging that Savchenko had disobeyed instructions not to run operations.¹⁹ Not only had he betrayed Savchenko, GRU Chief Shalin's "close friend,"²⁰ but by using KGB channels, he had shamed the GRU

¹² Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Birds*, 172.

¹³ Deriabin and Schechter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 60.

¹⁴ Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Birds*, 172.

¹⁵ Hart, *The CIA's Russians*, 59.

¹⁶ Deriabin and Schechter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 14.

¹⁷ Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Birds*, 172.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ CIA, "Meeting #1 (LONDON)," 11, 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

in front of its intelligence rival.²¹ As a result of his transgression, Penkovsky was recalled to Moscow in November 1956.²²

Distrusted by both GRU and KGB officers alike, Penkovsky's career entered a standstill as the GRU placed him on the reserve list and blocked his attempts to rejoin the regular army.²³ Consequently, he entered the Dzerzhinsky Academy for a nine-month course on missiles in 1958 as a temporary face-saving measure.²⁴ After graduating from Dzerzhinsky Academy, it appeared that a bright future awaited Penkovsky once again.²⁵ General Ivan Serov, who Penkovsky had sent the out-of-channels message to from Ankara, had moved from chairman of the KGB to head of the GRU and wanted to send Penkovsky to New Delhi as rezident.²⁶ However, Penkovsky's transgressions in Turkey prompted the KGB to reexamine his background and unearth his father's White Army personnel file.²⁷ Concerned that Penkovsky's father might have fled to the West rather than have died of typhus as Penkovsky had previously reported, the KGB prohibited Penkovsky from assuming his post in New Delhi but permitted him to remain in the GRU after his mother submitted a statement detailing her family's ignorance of her husband's fate.²⁸

After the KGB's discovery, Penkovsky's career aspirations were once again put on hold. He was placed on the reserve list, transferred to the GRU's Near East directorate in February 1960, and then quickly reassigned to the Military and Diplomatic Academy as a member of the selection board in June 1960.²⁹ Penkovsky's career ambitions then appeared to be resurrected by an offer to assume a senior position at the Military and Diplomatic Academy that carried the rank of general, but the

²¹ Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Birds*, 173.

²² CIA, "Meeting #1 (LONDON)," 13.

²³ Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Birds*, 173.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Hart, *The CIA's Russians*, 83.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Birds*, 175.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

KGB blocked his appointment.³⁰ As a result, Penkovsky was forced to accept a lower assignment as Deputy Chief of the State Committee for the Coordination of Scientific Technical Matter's Foreign Section, an organ of the Soviet Union's Council of Ministers that handled all scientific and technical relations with foreign countries.³¹ With the assignment came a startling revelation from the Chief of the Personnel Directorate, Lieutenant General Smolikov. Once Penkovsky completed his twenty-five years of service in 1962, he would be discharged due to his political unreliability.³²



His Soviet intelligence career ambitions dashed, Oleg Penkovsky decides to help the West.

Penkovsky's Decision to Spy for the West

Penkovsky had great difficulty accepting that his twenty-three years of hard work and initiative in the Soviet service could be nullified by his father's decision to fight the Bolshevik Revolution in 1918.³³ Penkovsky detailed his frustration in his second meeting with his case officers on April 21, 1961, stating,

³⁰ Ibid., 176.

³¹ Frank Gibney, introduction to *The Penkovsky Papers* (London: Doubleday & Company, 1965), 17.

³² Deriabin and Schecter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 59.

³³ Gibney, introduction to *The Penkovsky Papers*, 97.

"I spent many years amongst generals and marshals, even my wife's father was a general and my grand-uncle also; but his grandson [sic], me, I'm only a colonel. I'll never be made a general, since my father was a White Army officer."³⁴ Disaffected and in need of an outlet for his limitless ambition, he decided to turn to espionage and use his extensive knowledge and connections to further Western foreign policy. As he told his case officers, "They don't trust me; they'll never make me a general. My problem now is to do our work and be ready to fulfill your orders."³⁵ Providing the West with Soviet secrets would not only enable him to exact revenge on the regime that had betrayed him,³⁶ but it would also endow him with a new outlet for his ambition: the opportunity to be the greatest spy in history.³⁷

Approaching the West

Although Penkovsky had toyed with the idea of defecting to the West after his infraction in Turkey,³⁸ the derailment of his career by his father's decision to join the White Army served as the final impetus for his defection to the West on the evening of August 12, 1960. After stalking the American embassy in Moscow for weeks for a reliable government official to approach,³⁹ Penkovsky grew impatient and approached two American tourists, Eldon Ray Cox and Henry Lee Cobb, while they were crossing the Moskvoretsky Bridge to return to their hotel.⁴⁰ He struck up a casual conversation with the two in English and after ensuring that no one was watching, handed them a letter and begged them to help him contact the American government.⁴¹ Sensing that Cox and Cobb considered him a provocateur after their cold response to his plea, Penkovsky attempted to prove his sincerity by offering information on the U-2 spy plane piloted by Francis Gary Powers that was shot down

³⁴ CIA, "Meeting #2," April 21, 1961, FOIA: 0000012393, 45.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Tom Bower, *The Perfect English Spy* (London: Heinemann, 1995), 275.

³⁷ Deriabin and Schechter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 93.

³⁸ CIA, "Meeting #1 (LONDON)," 13.

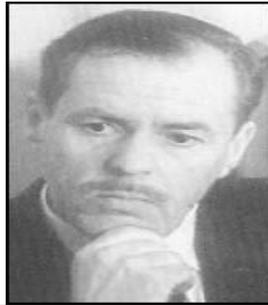
³⁹ Hart, *The CIA's Russians*, 59.

⁴⁰ Deriabin and Schechter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 5.

⁴¹ Ibid., 6.

near Sverdlovsk three and a half months earlier on May 1, 1960.⁴² But before Penkovsky could convince the Americans of his integrity, two policemen walked by, prompting the Americans to walk away.⁴³

Dismayed by what he considered to be a failed attempt to contact the American government, Penkovsky continued to approach foreigners he encountered through the course of his work with the Committee. In December 1960, he approached Dr. A.D. Merriman, a British metallurgy specialist,⁴⁴ Dr. J.M. Harrison, the Director of the Geological Survey of Canada,⁴⁵ and William Van Vliet, the Canadian Embassy Commercial Counselor.⁴⁶ Believing those attempts to be unsuccessful as well, Penkovsky begged Greville Wynne, a British businessman, in April 1961 to organize a Soviet trade delegation to Great Britain that would enable him to contact MI6.⁴⁷



British businessman Greville Wynne facilitates Penkovsky's contact with MI6

Wynne promised to help Penkovsky to the best of his ability, but upon his return to Great Britain, found that the CIA and MI6 were

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 39.

already crafting plans to contact Penkovsky.⁴⁸ While Penkovsky considered his attempt to contact the Americans on August 12 a failure, it was in fact a success. After meeting Penkovsky on the bridge that night, Cox immediately went to the American Embassy to deliver his letter, sparking a debate within the American government about Penkovsky's validity and subsequent unsuccessful attempts to contact Penkovsky in Moscow.⁴⁹



CIA's Richard Helms is convinced of Penkovsky's value

The West Responds

To the CIA, it seemed inconceivable that a man of Penkovsky's stature would want to spy for the West.⁵⁰ Jack Maury, head of the CIA's Soviet Clandestine Operations Division, initially believed Penkovsky's approach to be a provocation in retaliation for the embarrassment the GRU suffered following the exposure of Pyotr Popov, a GRU

⁴⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁹ Hart, *The CIA's Russians*, 61.

⁵⁰ Ernest Volkman, *Spies: The Secret Agents Who Changed the Course of History* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994), 24.

lieutenant colonel turned CIA spy, in 1959.⁵¹ It was not only improbable that a man with Penkovsky's commitment to the Communist Party would be a genuine defector, but it was also implausible that the KGB was uninformed of Penkovsky's contact with Cox and Cobb given the tight surveillance the KGB maintained over foreigners.⁵² However, after examining the material Penkovsky passed to Cox and Cobb more closely, Maury decided that a provocateur would not turn over sensitive information on the U-2 and RB-47 incidents and convinced Richard Helms, then Chief of Operations for the Directorate for Plans, to pursue Penkovsky.⁵³

Without permission from Ambassador Thompson to use a Foreign Service officer to fill the dead drop described in Penkovsky's letter and with no CIA operatives in Moscow, Maury and Helms had little choice but to send an inexperienced CIA officer, codenamed "COMPASS," to Moscow under the cover of an American embassy janitor on October 4, 1960.⁵⁴ Due to COMPASS' inexperience in the field and the extreme sensitivity the operation required,⁵⁵ COMPASS was unable to initiate contact with Penkovsky during his ten months in Moscow.⁵⁶

By January 1961, Helms became impatient with COMPASS' lack of progress and decided to seek British assistance.⁵⁷ Discussions on a joint CIA-MI6 operation began on January 27, 1961 when Joe Bulik, head of CIA operations inside the Soviet Union, informed Harold Shergold, one of MI6's most experienced agent handlers, of Penkovsky's initial approach to Cox and Cobb and extended through April 1961 when Penkovsky applied for a visa to visit Great Britain with a trade delegation.⁵⁸ Determined to add an agent of Penkovsky's caliber

⁵¹ Deriabin and Schecter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 16, 17.

⁵² Richard Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder* (New York: Random House, 2003), 220.

⁵³ Deriabin and Schecter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 17.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁵ Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, 219.

⁵⁶ Deriabin and Schecter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 222.

⁵⁷ Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, 221.

⁵⁸ Deriabin and Schecter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 42.

to its roster, the CIA agreed to run Penkovsky as a joint operation with MI6 and began to prepare for his arrival in London.⁵⁹

Penkovsky's Espionage Endeavors

On April 20, 1961 at eleven o'clock, Penkovsky's first encounter with Western intelligence took place in room 360 of the Mount Royal Hotel in London.⁶⁰ Informed of the meeting by Wynne, he came prepared with two packets of handwritten notes and documents to demonstrate his credentials⁶¹ to his four intelligence officers: Joe Bulik and George Kisevalter of the CIA and Harold Shergold and Michael Stokes of MI6.⁶²

Over the course of this visit to London in April 1961 and two other temporary tours of duty in London in July 1961 and Paris in September 1961, Penkovsky met with his intelligence officers forty-two times,⁶³ producing 140 hours of recordings and some 1,200 pages of transcripts.⁶⁴ He would then deliver information he obtained from the GRU library or social encounters with other military officers to his handlers from Moscow through three methods: apparently chance encounters with Janet Chisholm, the wife of MI6 Moscow case officer, Roderick Chisholm,⁶⁵ meetings at the homes or offices of British or American officials whom he would normally be expected to visit on business, or dead drops.⁶⁶

However, Penkovsky's desire to be the world's best spy led him to redouble his activity instead of lessening it while under KGB surveillance during the summer of 1962, paving the way for

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 47.

⁶¹ Gibney, introduction to *The Penkovsky Papers*, 96.

⁶² Deriabin and Schecter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 43.

⁶³ Len Scott, "Penkovsky: A Western Success Story," in *Exploring Intelligence Archives*, ed. R. Gerald Hughes, Peter Jackson, and Len Scott (New York: Rutledge, 2008), 166.

⁶⁴ Deriabin and Schecter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 351.

⁶⁵ Joseph Trento, *The Secret History of the CIA* (Roseville: Prima, 2001), 245.

⁶⁶ Gibney, introduction to *The Penkovsky Papers*, 203.

his arrest.⁶⁷ On October 22, a day after Kennedy announced his intention to blockade Cuba, KGB special forces arrested him at his home.⁶⁸ After months of interrogation, Penkovsky was put on trial for treason with Wynne.⁶⁹ On May 11, 1963, he was convicted and sentenced to death while Wynne was sentenced to eight years of incarceration.⁷⁰ Penkovsky was then executed on May 16, 1963 by firing squad.⁷¹

Penkovsky's Exposure

Although Penkovsky operated as an American spy from April 1961 to August 1962, he was first exposed as a spy shortly after his first visit to London in April 1961, sixteen months before his arrest.⁷² Tennent Bagley, former Deputy Chief of the CIA's Soviet Bloc Division, asserts that one of Wynne's encounters during his incarceration provides evidence that the KGB knew about Penkovsky's treason as early as May 1961. In October 1963, after Wynne had spent five months in prison, the KGB transported him to Moscow for further interrogation to determine if he had had contact with other spies during his business trips to Eastern Europe.⁷³ During the interrogation, Wynne was suddenly asked if he knew someone by the name of "Zepp."⁷⁴ Seeing that Wynne was confused by the name, the KGB interrogator turned on a tape recording of clinking tableware followed by Penkovsky's voice asking "And how is Zepp?"⁷⁵ Baffled at first, Wynne remembered that Penkovsky had once asked him about a bar girl they had met in a London nightclub named "Zeph," not "Zepp," at a Moscow restaurant in May 1961.⁷⁶ As the KGB was informed that Penkovsky was working officially with Wynne and was therefore not supposed to tail him or record his

⁶⁷ Ibid., 233.

⁶⁸ Victor Cherkashin, *Spy Handler* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 61.

⁶⁹ Raymond Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, (Washington: Brookings, 1987), 39.

⁷⁰ Deriabin and Schecter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 370.

⁷¹ Bower, *The Perfect English Spy*, 286.

⁷² Tennent Bagley, *Spy Wars* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007), 151.

⁷³ Ibid., 150.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 151.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

conversations, this disclosure reveals that the KGB had specific reason to bug Penkovsky's lunch conversation and was aware of Penkovsky's treason sixteen months before his arrest.⁷⁷

Bagley also cites an incident in December 1961 as evidence that Penkovsky was exposed early in his espionage career. At one of Penkovsky's final meetings in Paris on October 2, 1961, a dead drop protocol was formulated.⁷⁸ If he intended to leave materials in the dead drop, he would call one of two numbers at the American embassy, blow into the mouthpiece three times, and then wait one minute and repeat the procedure.⁷⁹ The Americans would then go to telephone pole number 35 on Kutuzovsky Prospekt and look for a freshly marked letter X on the pole that would signify that Penkovsky had loaded the dead drop on Pushkin Street.⁸⁰ At nine o'clock on December 25, 1961, one of the two embassy phones received two voiceless calls in succession.⁸¹ Though unable to hear any blowing into the phone and counting three minutes between calls instead of one, the wife of the American Assistant Military Attaché, Alexis Davison, still informed CIA Station Chief Garbler and John Abidian, the American Embassy Security Officer, of the calls.⁸² Attending the Ambassador's Christmas party, Garbler feigned illness from the drinks and told his host that Abidian would drive him home.⁸³ Despite stopping in front of the telephone pole so Garbler could pretend to vomit for the benefit of the KGB tail, both Garbler and Abidian were unable to see a mark on the pole and did not see traces of a mark when visiting the site in the following days.⁸⁴ As voiceless calls are rare, let alone two in succession to a private American Embassy line, it must have been the KGB who attempted to employ Penkovsky's signaling system.⁸⁵ Consequently, the KGB knew about

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 148.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 148, 149.

⁸³ Ibid., 149.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Penkovsky much earlier than the winter of 1961 and since Penkovsky's signaling instructions were never committed to paper, must have been alerted to his activities by a mole close to the operation. But if the KGB knew of Penkovsky's espionage endeavors at such an early point in his career as a Western spy, why would they allow him to travel to London in July 1961 and Paris in September 1961 and continue to allow him access to secret archives until his arrest?

Bagley contends that the KGB allowed Penkovsky to continue spying for the West because it needed "to hide the very existence of the secret source that exposed Penkovsky."⁸⁶ The source was likely so close to the highly classified Penkovsky operation that he or she would inevitably become suspect if the West began to investigate how Penkovsky had been compromised.⁸⁷ Consequently, the KGB had to provide some innocent explanation for Penkovsky's exposure before they could arrest him.⁸⁸ But to warrant leaving Penkovsky with access to top-secret material, the source must have been a highly valuable mole with the potential to remain valuable or become even more so in the future.⁸⁹ Although in contradiction to the popular belief that Penkovsky was detected by routine KGB surveillance, this account of Penkovsky's exposure is consistent with CIA theories of his exposure. On July 8, 1963, Helms sent a memo to CIA Director John McCone reporting that a source had disclosed that Penkovsky was compromised when Soviet agents in the United States "realized that some important information was leaking out of the Soviet Union."⁹⁰

The idea that Penkovsky was compromised by a mole stands in stark contradiction to the widely held belief that he was uncovered by routine KGB surveillance of Janet Chisholm for good reason: the surveillance story was planted by the upper

⁸⁶ Ibid., 151.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Richard Helms, "Penkovskiy Case Memorandum for the Director of Central Intelligence," July 8, 1963, FOIA No.: 0000012378.

echelons of the KGB to protect the identity of the mole. In order to protect the viability of the mole, the KGB had to create some innocent explanation for Penkovsky's exposure.⁹¹ The KGB permitted Penkovsky to travel abroad throughout the summer of 1961 in order to create the appearance that Penkovsky was uncompromised, and then prevented him from going abroad after October 1961 to force his Western handlers to meet him in Moscow and create an opportunity for him to be "routinely surveilled."⁹²

Playing right into the KGB's plan, Penkovsky met Mrs. Chisholm twelve times between October 20, 1961 and January 19, 1962, with eleven of those meetings occurring in public places where they could be watched.⁹³ Penkovsky's frequent exchanges with Mrs. Chisholm presented the KGB with the opportunity to begin the fabrication of the story that he was caught by surveillance. The former Deputy Chief of KGB Foreign Intelligence, General Vitaly Pavlov, disclosed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union that foreign intelligence, not counterintelligence, received the first indication of Penkovsky's treason and did not inform counterintelligence until the case became a "technical matter."⁹⁴

As a result, once Penkovsky began meeting with Mrs. Chisholm and the case became a technical matter, the KGB flagrantly increased security on him and began to curtail his access to confidential material as if they wanted the surveillance to be noticed. Penkovsky observed crude KGB surveillance during his meetings with Mrs. Chisholm as early as January 5, 1962⁹⁵ while former KGB counterintelligence officer, Victor Cherkashin, reveals that the KGB canceled Penkovsky's membership to the GRU library in the summer of 1962.⁹⁶ The KGB also advanced its surveillance story when it blocked

⁹¹ Bagley, *Spy Wars*, 151.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 152.

⁹³ Deriabin and Schechter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 394.

⁹⁴ Bagley, *Spy Wars*, 154.

⁹⁵ Oleg Penkovsky, "Letter to Handlers," March 28, 1962, FOIA No.: 0000012274.

⁹⁶ Cherkashin, *Spy Handler*, 61.

Penkovsky's applications to visit the United States in April 1962, Brazil in May 1962, and Cyprus in July 1962.⁹⁷ The KGB continued this charade until October 22, 1962, alleging that Penkovsky's rank necessitated incontrovertible proof before his arrest and that they conveniently had such proof during the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis.⁹⁸



Defector Yuri Nosenko: possibly sent by the KGB to hide Penkovsky's betrayal by a mole

In order to ensure that the surveillance theory became the accepted story of Penkovsky's compromise, the KGB circulated a secret briefing paper in the spring of 1963 alleging that Penkovsky's detection and arrest resulted from KGB agents spotting Penkovsky's successive contacts with Mrs. Chisholm through routine surveillance of Western diplomats in late 1961 and early 1962.⁹⁹ However, the KGB went one step further to

⁹⁷ Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Birds*, 187.

⁹⁸ Cherkashin, *Spy Handler*, 60.

⁹⁹ Bagley, *Spy Wars*, 153.

ensure that its account was accepted: they sent Yuri Nosenko to prepare the CIA to accept the “surveillance” theory and not look deeper into Penkovsky’s exposure.¹⁰⁰ As the KGB was escalating its surveillance charade in the spring of 1962, Nosenko was sent to Geneva in March 1962.¹⁰¹ Upon contacting the CIA in May 1962, Nosenko described the KGB’s vast surveillance of Western diplomats in Moscow and how it had uncovered Popov.¹⁰² He even stated that the KGB hoped “to catch another Popov”¹⁰³ and inquired about “Zepp.”¹⁰⁴ Consequently, this correlation of dates suggests that Nosenko was sent by the KGB to hide the fact that Penkovsky was betrayed by a mole.¹⁰⁵

As both Nosenko and fellow KGB officer turned defector, Anatoly Golitsyn, reported that Penkovsky was detected through routine surveillance, authors such as Peter Wright and Edward Jay Epstein advanced the theory. However, both authors’ arguments hinge on the assumption that Penkovsky’s recruitment occurred when he visited the American Embassy in Moscow on business and offered to provide the West with intelligence.¹⁰⁶ Both allege that even if Penkovsky was a genuine defector, the KGB would have learned of his offer to spy for the Americans immediately because the Soviets had hidden microphones in the American Embassy that would have allowed his offer to be monitored by the KGB.¹⁰⁷ But Penkovsky had never once entered the embassy,¹⁰⁸ invalidating this claim and discrediting the surveillance theory.

While the evidence supporting the theory of a mole is strong, little is known about the identity of the mole. Although Bagley admits that the mole remains unknown, he states that the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 154.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Peter Wright, *Spycatcher* (New York: Viking, 1987), 208.

¹⁰⁷ Edward Jay Epstein, *Deception* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 79.

¹⁰⁸ Tom Mangold, *Cold Warrior* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 99.

mole was in “one or both of the handling services, MI6 and/or CIA” and must have been so close to the operation that he or she would come under suspicion if Penkovsky were to be abruptly arrested, be one of the few privy to the dead drop arrangements, and not know about the bar girl “Zeph.”¹⁰⁹ This criteria narrows down the pool of suspects, but the large number of people involved in the Penkovsky operation makes identification of the mole challenging. 1,700 people in Britain alone had access to Penkovsky’s material during the operation¹¹⁰ while another 150 in Washington knew of a unique source in Moscow.¹¹¹ Tom Bower speculates that Lieutenant-Colonel William Whalen, an intelligence adviser to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or Jack Dunlap, an Army Sergeant stationed at the NSA, could have been the mole as both were KGB informants during the period of the Penkovsky operation.¹¹² However, neither would have had access to the operation’s dead drop arrangements, making it likely that someone closer to the operation served as the mole.

Penkovsky as an Unwitting Soviet Agent of Disinformation

As the KGB’s surveillance charade progressed and the likelihood of implicating the mole by arresting Penkovsky diminished, the KGB began feeding him false information in the spring of 1962 that he believed to be true and passed on to the CIA and MI6, transforming him into an unwitting Soviet agent of disinformation. Sir Dick White, the former Chief of MI6, asserts that Penkovsky came under Soviet control in the spring of 1962 as the KGB increased surveillance and thus its ability to control his access to information.¹¹³ Unlike the CIA, the British Intelligence community was concerned about the credibility of Penkovsky’s political intelligence from the start of the operation as he was always at least one step removed from the

¹⁰⁹ Bagley, *Spy Wars*, 155.

¹¹⁰ Wright, *Spycatcher*, 209.

¹¹¹ Bower, *The Perfect English Spy*, 283.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Scott, “Penkovsky: A Western Success Story,” 157.

policymaking process and could thus be unwittingly misled.¹¹⁴ However, both the CIA and MI6 began to regard his political judgements on events in the Kremlin as unreliable in the spring of 1962.¹¹⁵

Although much of the information Penkovsky turned over in the spring and summer of 1962 remains classified and thus unavailable for analysis of disinformation,¹¹⁶ Len Scott reports that “Penkovsky’s representations of Khrushchev’s views, while reflecting what senior military officers believed and debated, almost certainly seriously misrepresented Khrushchev’s intentions.”¹¹⁷ Gordon Brook-Shepherd concurs, asserting that Penkovsky’s political judgements on events in the Kremlin “soon came to be regarded as very uncertain.”¹¹⁸ It would not be difficult for the KGB to feed Penkovsky disinformation. As they controlled his access to confidential materials¹¹⁹ and Penkovsky obtained most of his political intelligence from interaction with GRU, KGB, and military officers at social events,¹²⁰ the KGB could easily provide him with an inaccurate missile manual or recruit one of its agents to feed him false political intelligence. As a result, concerns of Penkovsky’s viability began to emerge in the U.S. Intelligence Community. A July 20, 1962 CIA Memorandum on Counterintelligence Activities that references Penkovsky by his codename, “CHICKADEE,” states:

“Most recent reports were received July 4th and 5th, together with information leading us to believe CHICKADEE is in trouble. We conclude he is under suspicion, possible surveillance, and even might have been compromised to the point where he could be acting as a counter-agent. We therefore are studying his most recent

¹¹⁴ Deriabin and Schecter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 287.

¹¹⁵ Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Birds*, 181.

¹¹⁶ Scott, “Penkovsky: A Western Success Story,” 144.

¹¹⁷ Scott, “Espionage and the Cold War: Oleg Penkovsky and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” 27.

¹¹⁸ Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Birds*, 181.

¹¹⁹ Cherkashin, *Spy Handler*, 61.

¹²⁰ Gibney, introduction to *The Penkovsky Papers*, 26.

reports which covered certain aspects of military doctrine most carefully, checking them against all sources available to us and are not disseminating them pending a judgment as to their bona fides."¹²¹

As the rest of the document is redacted, it is likely that the CIA has even greater evidence that Penkovsky became an unwitting Soviet conduit of disinformation.

However, it is unlikely that such files will ever be declassified as the story of a high-level GRU intelligence officer turned genuine Western spy provided good publicity for both the CIA and MI6. The Penkovsky operation restored confidence in the CIA after the U-2 incident in May 1960 and the Bay of Pigs debacle in Cuba.¹²² Overnight, it transformed the CIA from an agency that had trouble finding a KGB telephone number in Moscow to one that had access to the Soviet Union's most closely held secrets.¹²³ It was such a large success for the CIA that it released the commercial book, *The Penkovsky Papers*, in hopes that it would generate public support for the agency and embarrass the Soviet Union with details of its high-level penetration.¹²⁴ In addition, the operation restored faith in MI6 after its series of defections to the Soviet Union, making it unlikely that those files will also ever be unveiled.¹²⁵ Consequently, while evidence points to Penkovsky transforming from a genuine defector with credible information to an unwitting conduit of Soviet disinformation in the spring of 1962, the degree of his use as an agent of disinformation will not be known until relevant CIA and MI6 files are declassified.

¹²¹ CIA, "MEMORANDUM ON COUNTERINTELLIGENCE ACTIVITIES," July 20, 1962, FOIA No. 0000012360.

¹²² Len Scott, "The 'Incredible Wrongness' of Nikita Khrushchev: The CIA and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *History* (April 2015), 226.

¹²³ Trento, *The Secret History of the CIA*, 224.

¹²⁴ Victor Marchetti and John Marks, *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 177.

¹²⁵ Trento, *The Secret History of the CIA*, 237.

The degree of his status as a conduit of disinformation is also further complicated by the likelihood that the Soviets provided him with “chicken feed,” or accurate information intended to maintain the credibility their deception.¹²⁶ As there is no way of knowing how much chicken feed the Soviets provided Penkovsky with in comparison to disinformation, it would be difficult to surmise if the incorrect information Penkovsky provided was the result of a Soviet disinformation exercise or the unreliability of one of his sources.

While Penkovsky likely came under Soviet control in the spring of 1962, it is unlikely that he knew of his use as a conduit for disinformation. In a March 28, 1962 letter to his handlers, Penkovsky voiced concerns of surveillance and attempted to formulate an operational plan that would prevent his detection, writing, “Surveillance is being conducted on [REDACTED], perhaps periodically. It is advisable to stop meetings on the street for three or four months, [REDACTED] should continue to behave naturally and at the same time should continue frequenting the shops and the same streets and pereuloks, as in the past.”¹²⁷ If Penkovsky was a knowing agent of disinformation, he would not describe the extensive surveillance he was under as he would not want to provide any indication to his handlers that he might be under Soviet control. Perhaps the Soviets would want him to detail the extent of his surveillance if he was a knowing conduit in order to advance the surveillance theory of his exposure and protect the mole, but a knowing agent of disinformation would also not attempt to halt meetings as they would then have no means to pass on the disinformation. In addition, Penkovsky had genuine motivations for defecting. Frustrated by his lack of career prospects after committing his life to the Soviet cause, he sought to exact revenge on the Soviet regime by passing its secrets to the West.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Scott, “Penkovsky: A Western Success Story,” 157.

¹²⁷ Penkovsky, “Letter to Handlers.”

¹²⁸ Bower, *The Perfect English Spy*, 275.

But if Penkovsky was a conduit for a Soviet disinformation campaign, why would the KGB arrest him at one of the tensest moments of the Cuban Missile Crisis instead of using him to influence Kennedy's decision making? The possibility exists that President Kennedy utilized Georgi Bolshakov, a Soviet reporter in Washington who served as a secret back-channel of communication between the White House and Khrushchev,¹²⁹ to inform Khrushchev of Penkovsky's treason in order to advance détente and increase the likelihood that the crisis would be solved without force.¹³⁰ As Scott asserts, Kennedy's use of Bolshakov as a back channel to Khrushchev was not discontinued when Kennedy learned of the existence of missiles in Cuba.¹³¹ Instead, Bolshakov served as a back channel throughout the crisis,¹³² creating the opportunity for Kennedy to attempt to advance détente by giving up Penkovsky, the United States' most valuable spy.

Impact of Penkovsky's Information on American Foreign Policy

Although Penkovsky's espionage endeavors were quickly detected by the KGB, he was able to disseminate credible, top-secret information before his exposure during his first trip to London. The Soviets then permitted him to relinquish secrets to the West during the summer and fall of 1961 in order to protect the identity of the mole that exposed him. After the KGB intelligence charade began, they continued to allow him to supply certain pieces of reliable intelligence in order to maintain the credibility of the disinformation campaign.¹³³ As a result, despite his early detection and transformation into a Soviet agent of disinformation, Penkovsky was still able to provide the United States with credible intelligence that changed perceptions of

¹²⁹ Len Scott, "Secret Intelligence, Covert Action and Clandestine Diplomacy," *Intelligence and National Security* (Summer 2004), 333.

¹³⁰ Richard Thornton, discussion with author, December 3, 2015.

¹³¹ Scott, "Secret Intelligence, Covert Action and Clandestine Diplomacy," 333.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Scott, "Penkovsky: A Western Success Story," 157.

Khrushchev's strategic nuclear capabilities and intentions and advanced U.S. foreign policy objectives.¹³⁴

Penkovsky was not directly involved in Soviet decision-making, but he was able to learn of Khrushchev's plan to sign a peace treaty with East Germany through a meeting with Varentsov and inform the West of Khrushchev's intentions,¹³⁵ enabling President Kennedy to successfully call Khrushchev's bluff through a show of force and diffuse the crisis. On Sunday, July 2, 1961 in a park off Tsvetnoy Boulevard,¹³⁶ Penkovsky passed Janet Chisholm two typewritten sheets of paper that contained an account on Berlin by Varentsov, stating:

"Firmness in politics is necessary, in particular on the German question, and the West will retreat before this firmness. The Soviet government knows that signing this treaty means a certain risk and danger, but they are not worried, because they know that the FRG still is not ready for war and needs two or three years more. The U.S., Britain, and France, because of this, will not start a big war and will retreat. We also do not want a big war, but we want to force the West to begin to negotiate with the GDR . . . These first negotiations with the GDR will amount to the first recognition of the GDR, and this is important for history."¹³⁷

Passed to President Kennedy on July 13 by CIA Director Allen Dulles,¹³⁸ this account was among the first to alert Kennedy to Khrushchev's plan to weaken Allied control in Berlin¹³⁹ and permitted Kennedy to craft a plan of action informed by

¹³⁴ Deriabin and Schechter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 3.

¹³⁵ Scott, "Espionage and the Cold War: Oleg Penkovsky and the Cuban Missile Crisis," 35.

¹³⁶ Deriabin and Schechter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 184.

¹³⁷ Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 268.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Hart, *The CIA's Russians*, 91.

Khrushchev's strategy. Knowing that Khrushchev's plan depended on American capitulation, Kennedy met Khrushchev's aggression with firmness, calling up National Guard divisions, reinforcing U.S. troops in Germany, and resuming nuclear testing.¹⁴⁰ Although Khrushchev would erect the Berlin Wall on August 13, 1961, Kennedy's demonstration of strength forced Khrushchev's bluff to gradually lose its credibility, allowing the Berlin Crisis to wither away with the conclusion of the 22nd Party Congress on October 31.¹⁴¹ As a result, the crisis was resolved favorably from the American standpoint, as the Soviets did not sign a peace treaty with East Germany, East Germany did not assume control of access to West Berlin, and the United States did not need to initiate any of the escalating military countermeasures planned in response to a potential Berlin blockade.¹⁴² The outcome of the crisis also severely damaged Khrushchev's authority, as many military officers began to question Khrushchev's decision to risk war over a minor issue when the Soviet Union had insufficient military capabilities.¹⁴³



Penkovsky's information helped JFK defeat
Soviet strategy

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 92, 93.

¹⁴¹ James Perry, 1996, *The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy, 1961*, PhD dissertation, The George Washington University (Washington: ProQuest/UMI, Publication No. 9701906), 510.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ James Richter, *Khrushchev's Double Bind* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994), 143.

In addition to allowing Kennedy to successfully address the Berlin Crisis, Penkovsky's information forced a reexamination of the U.S.-Soviet missile gap. When President John F. Kennedy took office in 1961, little was known about the Soviet Union's strategic nuclear capabilities. Although Kennedy campaigned on the premise of a "missile gap" between the United States and Soviet Union during the 1960 presidential election,¹⁴⁴ evidence on the Soviet missile deployment remained inconclusive until June 1961, nearly five months into Kennedy's term.¹⁴⁵ In the June 1961 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), the Air Force estimated that the Soviet Union had as many as 300 ICBMs deployed, the Navy predicted that the Soviet missile deployment stood at less than a dozen, and the CIA and State Department split the difference with an estimate of 150, creating confusion throughout the Kennedy administration.¹⁴⁶ As a result of such contradictory estimates, U.S. foreign policy as a whole was in flux.¹⁴⁷ Unable to accurately predict the Soviet Union's capabilities or intentions, the Kennedy administration stumbled through its first months in office, launching the disastrous Bay of Pigs Invasion in April 1961¹⁴⁸ and failing to project strength at the June 1961 Vienna Summit.¹⁴⁹ Intent on capitalizing on a weak American position, Khrushchev began to look for soft spots in the American containment structure.¹⁵⁰ However, information provided by Penkovsky during his first trip to London dramatically altered American perceptions of Soviet strength by demonstrating that while a missile gap existed, it did not exist in favor of the Soviet Union, but rather in favor the United States. When Wynne met Penkovsky at Heathrow on April 20, 1961, Penkovsky handed him a packet of seventy-eight pages of Secret and Top Secret material comprised of SS-6, SS-1, SS-4, and SS-5 manuals and information and four photocopies of

¹⁴⁴ Joseph Trento, *The Secret History of the CIA* (Roseville: Prima, 2001), 238.

¹⁴⁵ Roger Hilsman, *The Cuban Missile Crisis* (Westport: Praeger, 1996), 5.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Hart, *The CIA's Russians*, 85.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Gordon Barrass, *The Great Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), 131.

¹⁵⁰ Perry, *The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy, 1961*, 510.

construction plans for missile-launching installations.¹⁵¹ Such information would be accounted for in the September 1961 NIE, which reduced the estimate of Soviet nuclear strength to less than thirty-five missiles.¹⁵² Consequently, the information Penkovsky handed Wynne would give Kennedy the confidence necessary to take bold action against the Soviet Union by proving that the Soviet Union lacked the nuclear missile capability Khrushchev claimed.

The packet of intelligence Penkovsky delivered to Wynne at Heathrow not only altered perceptions of Soviet strength, but also enabled the identification of missiles in Cuba in October 1962 and allowed President Kennedy to act from a position of knowledge and strength during the Cuban Missile Crisis.¹⁵³ On October 14, 1962, a U-2 flight was conducted over the San Cristobal area where installations of SS-4 medium range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) were previously detected.¹⁵⁴ After comparing the photos taken during the flight with the manual for the SS-4 that Penkovsky had supplied in 1961, the National Photographic Intelligence Center had irrefutable proof that the Cubans were armed with tactical nuclear warheads¹⁵⁵ and immediately informed President Kennedy who convened the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm).¹⁵⁶ As the manual Penkovsky supplied also detailed missile site construction schedules and the missile re-fire rates, the CIA was then able to inform Kennedy and ExComm that although some medium-range missiles that could reach Washington would soon be operational, the sites for the long-range missiles would not be completed for another two months.¹⁵⁷ Such knowledge would prove highly valuable in the crisis, permitting the President to know how much time he had to

¹⁵¹ Deriabin and Schechter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 93.

¹⁵² Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only*, 273.

¹⁵³ Deriabin and Schechter, *The Spy Who Saved the World*, 392.

¹⁵⁴ Charles Cogan, "The Espionage of Oleg Penkovsky," in *Exploring Intelligence Archives*, ed. R. Gerald Hughes, Peter Jackson, and Len Scott (New York: Rutledge, 2008), 142.

¹⁵⁵ Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only*, 290.

¹⁵⁶ Barrass, *The Great Cold War*, 139.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

negotiate before taking military action to destroy the missiles.¹⁵⁸ As a result, Kennedy opted to negotiate with Khrushchev instead of launching immediate air attacks,¹⁵⁹ potentially saving the world from nuclear war.

It has been argued by authors such as Epstein that Khrushchev deliberately used Penkovsky to deliver the missile manuals to the CIA in order to manipulate President Kennedy into giving up the Monroe Doctrine by accepting a hostile regime allied with the Soviet Union in Cuba.¹⁶⁰ However, this interpretation of events is completely inaccurate. Penkovsky provided the relevant missile manuals to Wynne on April 20, 1961, hours before he first met his case officers and thus hours before the mole would be able to inform the Soviets of Penkovsky's treason. In addition, Penkovsky began collecting missile manuals during his missile course at Dzerzhinsky Academy in 1959,¹⁶¹ long before the Kremlin could have conceived of using him as a pawn in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Consequently, the idea that Khrushchev utilized Penkovsky to manipulate Kennedy into giving up the Monroe Doctrine was an attempt by the Soviets to conceal the true damage Penkovsky inflicted on Soviet foreign policy.

Conclusion

Despite spying for the West from April 1961 to August 1962, Penkovsky became an unwitting Soviet conduit of disinformation after a mole in the upper echelons of American or British intelligence alerted the KGB to his treason in the spring of 1961. However, his compromise did not impede his ability to contribute to the advancement of American foreign policy. The technical and political intelligence Penkovsky passed to his handlers in the spring and summer of 1961 enabled President Kennedy to diffuse the Berlin Crisis without force, understand the true nature of the missile gap, and address the Cuban Missile

¹⁵⁸ Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, 220.

¹⁵⁹ Barrass, *The Great Cold War*, 143.

¹⁶⁰ Epstein, *Deception*, 80.

¹⁶¹ Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Birds*, 194.

Crisis without the use of nuclear weapons. In addition, the information Penkovsky provided during his early espionage endeavors proved so damaging to the Soviet intelligence network that his arrest prompted a reorganization of the Soviet intelligence community. General Serov was transferred from his post as head of the GRU and publicly demoted while some 300 Soviet intelligence officers were almost immediately recalled to Moscow from foreign posts after Penkovsky's arrest.¹⁶² As a result, Penkovsky achieved his desire to become the greatest spy in history despite his early exposure and eventual transformation into a Soviet conduit of disinformation.

¹⁶² Gibney, introduction to *The Penkovsky Papers*, 19.