

THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD

The Defection of Oleg Gordievsky

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President Ronald Reagan meets with Oleg Gordievsky after his defection to the West.

When Oleg Gordievsky, second in command at the KGB residency in London, was recalled to Moscow for “consultation” in 1985, he feared the KGB was onto him. Gordievsky had reason to be concerned—unbeknownst to him, a KGB spy in the CIA had provided Moscow with information that strongly implied he was working for Western intelligence. And indeed, he had spent the previous 11 years secretly spying for the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS).

But Gordievsky decided to ignore his gut feeling and return to Moscow to stick it out. Upon arrival, he quickly found that his suspicions were well-founded after all—his apartment had obviously been searched, colleagues avoided him, and he sensed that the KGB monitored his every move. After

several weeks in suspense, Gordievsky was summoned to a meeting with KGB superior at a dacha outside Moscow. There, he was drugged, and two no-nonsense KGB counterintelligence officers began to work him over. Accusing Gordievsky of espionage for the British, they shouted: “Confess now! Don’t you remember? You confessed a moment ago. Confess again!” Through the drug-infused haze, Gordievsky vaguely realized that the KGB still needed his confession to formally arrest him. By mechanically repeating, “no, I didn’t,” he avoided handing his interrogators a rope to hang him.

Gordievsky was then transferred to a meaningless desk job at KGB headquarters. He was well aware that the KGB was just waiting to catch him make a false move. But in spite of close surveillance, Gordievsky managed to contact SIS who initiated a prearranged escape plan.

On a warm July morning, Gordievsky began his usual jogging routine, clad in baggy sweat pants and carrying nothing but an old plastic bag. The KGB surveillance team evidently decided his outing was not worthwhile close monitoring. But instead of following his usual routine, Gordievsky boarded a northwest-bound train and travelled near the Finnish border. There, he hid in the underbrush off a country road and waited

for his British handlers. When they showed up, Gordievsky jumped into the trunk of their car, swallowed a sedative and hoped for the best. As the car approached the border, he pulled a thermo blanket over him to reduce heat emission, then lay still in the baking heat, his clothes sodden with sweat, for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, the car pulled forward—he had made it to Finland and freedom.

Gordievsky never regretted his espionage for SIS. His information was certainly priceless; among the many secrets Gordievsky revealed to SIS was the identity of John Cairncross, the last member of a notorious Soviet spy ring—the Cambridge Five—that had penetrated the higher echelons of British diplomacy and intelligence. Yet his defection came at a price. He had to leave his wife and two young daughters behind in the USSR, and his marriage ultimately dissolved. He has also lived under constant fear of retribution. In November 2007, he was taken to a hospital from his home in Surrey, England. Gordievsky—still partially paralyzed from the incident—remains convinced that he was the target of assassination attempt. The main suspect? His old employer, the Russian secret service. ■

