

MEMORANDUM

June 14, 1998

To: Jeremy Gunn
Executive Director

cc: Bob Skwirot
CIA Team Leader

From: Michelle Combs
Associate Director for Research and Review

Subject: Backchannel Communications Between Moscow and CIA Headquarters 1959-1964

The Review Board asked CIA whether there existed any form of backchannel (non-official) communications channel between CIA personnel in Moscow and CIA Headquarters through which information concerning Lee Harvey Oswald might have been passed to individuals at CIA Headquarters between 1959 and 1963. "Backchannel" was taken to mean, *inter alia*, any administrative, senior staff, or restricted access communications of a type not found in the CIA's JFK Collection. In a follow-up request, the Board inquired as to the nature of the "privacy" channel cited by former CIA officer Duane R. Clarridge in his book *A Spy For All Seasons*. (p. 312) This memorandum sets forth our understanding of CIA's response combined with our own inquiries.

Members of the CIA Team and I received a very detailed comprehensive briefing on the working of the CIA's Cable Secretariat as it handled electronic cable traffic in the late 1950's and early 1960's. In addition, I have reviewed a significant amount of information, both classified and unclassified, available on CIA activities in Moscow during the period 1957-1964. Finally, Joe Freeman and I have interviewed the senior CIA personnel in Moscow during the relevant period including Mr. Russell Langelle, the senior officer in Moscow from 1957-1959 and Mr. Paul Garbler, the first official Chief of Station, Moscow 1961-1964.

In general, CIA electronic cable traffic, during the relevant period, was handled by CIA communicators through a communications channel separate from that used by the Department of State for its cable traffic. CIA communicators were required to send an information copy of every communication between stations to "Director," that is, to Headquarters. Once a cable arrived at Headquarters, routing indicators at the top of the cable and cryptonyms in the "slug line" in the body of the cable were used to direct a cable to the proper recipients. Cables could receive widespread distribution or restricted, special, or proscribed and limited handling based on the sensitivity and type of information they contained. Any limited distribution to particular offices was

indicated by the routing indicators and any limited distribution within an office was indicated by the cable "slug line." Traffic received by a station from Headquarters or another station was handled in the same manner and distributed to the appropriate individual or branch within the station.

During the 1959-1963 time period, Moscow was an exception to the general rule. Moscow Station was not officially in existence until the arrival of Paul Garbler as Chief of Station in November 1961.

Until that time, various CIA officers were assigned as individuals, but there was no functioning "station" in terms of any coordinated activity between individual officers in country. In addition, there was no CIA communicator in Moscow during the relevant time period.

Prior to the formal opening of the station, individual CIA officers communicated with Headquarters through the use of one-time pads. Each officer communicated with Headquarters as necessary without circulating messages, either incoming or outgoing, between any other officers who might be in-country at that particular time. Given that messages went from Headquarters to an individual officer and from an individual officer to Headquarters, there was no need for any type of electronic "backchannel." Each officer had, in effect, his own private channel to and from Headquarters. All traffic to and from the station would be preserved as official communications.

Even after the station began functioning as a station in early 1962, I have found no information to contradict Garbler's statement, recounted in Molehunt by David Wise, that the senior person in Moscow used one-time pads to communicate with Headquarters. Given this secure, but very time consuming, method of communication, there was neither any need nor any means to effect a secure electronic "backchannel" to Headquarters. All traffic to and from Moscow would be logged in as official communications.

Once information from Moscow reached Headquarters, it was considered very sensitive and was given highly restrictive handling and distribution. Operational reporting and information reports were tightly compartmented within branches and offices to protect sources and methods. Only a few senior Directorate of Plans and Soviet (SR) Division officers would have had access to all incoming and outgoing information.

Additional means of moving information securely from a station to Headquarters and from Headquarters to a station did exist. Formal station traffic to and from CIA Headquarters through the diplomatic pouch was handled in the same manner as cable traffic. Dispatches were sent to the designated addressee and packages to the office, branch, or individual indicated on the address label. During the relevant time period, however, it would not have been unusual for a Chief of Station or any other member of a station to send an envelope marked "eyes only" to any individual in Headquarters, nor would it have been unusual someone in Headquarters to send an "eyes only" envelope to an individual in an overseas station. Since these types of messages were not considered

official CIA traffic, no records were kept. The messages reaching Moscow, if any, would be destroyed for security reasons once they reached the designated individual.

Station-to-station traffic was possible but infrequently utilized due to the constraints of encrypting and decrypting such messages by hand using one-time pads. Yet, it was entirely possible to send messages that were not-time-sensitive to and from individuals through the diplomatic pouch. Given the thoroughness of the KGB during this period, it is less likely, but possible, that messages were handed to individuals traveling out of country or between Headquarters and the Moscow station and hand carried to the designated addressee. Such hand carried messages would have not officially existed as CIA communications and no records would have been kept.

The "privacy" channel to which Mr. Clarridge refers in *A Spy For All Seasons* allows for Eyes Only messages of an administrative or personal nature to be sent between senior CIA officers. For example, discussions of promotions, assignments, or the health problems of a station officer would all be sent through the "privacy" channel. These messages are not filed as official records and so cannot be retrieved.

It does not appear likely that any regular "backchannel" communication system with recoverable records would have been used to transmit messages between Headquarters and the Moscow Station during the relevant time period. First, the time consuming and laborious task of encrypting and decrypting messages by hand using one-time pads would have necessarily limited the electronic communications sent to and from Moscow to the minimum. Secondly, due to security concerns, officers in-country functioned mostly as individuals rather than as a unit. Further, the zealotry of the KGB during the 1959-1963 time period made it less likely that sensitive messages would be entrusted to individuals traveling in or out of country.