

A MAN IN THE SPOTLIGHT: OLEG PENKOVSKY AND HIS ALLEGIANCE TO THE WEST

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Abstract: Prior to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, a GRU officer named Oleg Penkovsky attempted to contact the West multiple times. He did it to such an extent that initially he was regarded as a provocateur. After his recruitment, Penkovsky was handled by a joint team of CIA-MI6 team and provided information that compromised the Soviet intelligence operations in Western countries. He also helped identify the operational readiness of nuclear missiles deployed by the Soviets in Cuba. Officially, his role was in equal parts exaggerated and downplayed by the UK and the Soviet Union. The former sought to protect the sensitive information that was obtained, the latter attempted to limit the damage he caused. Conflicting accounts identified him as either a Soviets plant or as someone who saved the West and the world. This article presents the reasons that determined him to choose the West over his own country; it discusses some of the accusations he was subjected to, particularly those that claimed he was working for the Soviets the whole time he spied for the West. Finally, it attempts to explain the importance of the information provided prior to the Cuban crisis. All these arguments support the assessment that Penkovsky was a genuine spy who offered his services to the West.

Keywords: espionage, Cuban Missile Crisis, GRU, KGB, Penkovsky



Rezumat: Înaintea crizei rachetelor din Cuba din anul 1962, un ofițer GRU, pe nume Oleg Penkovsky, a încercat în nenumărate rânduri să își ofere serviciile țărilor vestice. Aceste eforturi au mers până într-atât încât, din acest motiv, a fost inițial considerat un agent provocator trimis de către sovietici. Cu toate acestea, după ce a fost recrutat de către o echipă mixtă a CIA și MI6, Penkovsky a oferit informații care au compromis operațiunile de spionaj ale Uniunii Sovietice în țările vestice și au ajutat la identificarea stării operaționale a rachetelor amplasate în Cuba. Oficial, rolul său a fost atât exagerat cât și diminuat: pe de o parte, Marea Britanie încerca să protejeze informațiile sensibile în posesia cărora intrase, pe de altă parte, Uniunea Sovietică încerca să limiteze pagubele create. Părerii diametral opuse susțin fie că el a fost o persoană loială sovieticilor, fie că acțiunile lui au salvat Vestul și lumea. Acest articol prezintă motivele care l-ar fi putut determina să lucreze pentru Vest în detrimentul țării sale; analizează câteva dintre acuzațiile aduse împotriva lui care se refereau la faptul că ar fi lucrat pentru sovietici în toată perioada în care a spionat pentru țările vestice; și încearcă să explice importanța

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informațiilor furnizate de acesta înainte de criza rachetelor. Toate aspectele prezentate susțin ipoteza conform căreia Penkovsky a fost cu adevărat un spion care a lucrat pentru Vest și nu un agent provocator.

Cuvinte cheie: criza rachetelor din Cuba, GRU, KGB, Penkovsky, spionaj

I. Introduction

Cold War GRU officer Oleg Penkovsky (1919-1963) is a controversial spy, and although some (rightfully) argue that he did not ‘save the world’ during the 1962 Cuba Missile Crisis, declassified documents show that he still played an important part in it¹. However, certain elements in Penkovsky’s case cast some shadow over his real value to the West, and there were allegations that stated that he was only the ‘Soviet postman at the time of missile crisis’². This article examines the role Oleg Penkovsky played in ‘saving the world’ by analysing three interlinked aspects. The first one comprises data about Penkovsky’s motivation, his attempts to contact the West, the information provided, and details about his arrest – all these aspects are reviewed in order to determine whether or not he was a genuine spy. Penkovsky’s motivation prior and after his recruitment by the CIA-MI6 raised some questions: Was he an atypical intelligence professional intending to spy for the West? or Was he a ‘lure’ dangled in support of a Soviet provocation operation³? Also, the accuracy of Penkovsky’s information is also subject to interpretation since ‘both Moscow and London had their own reasons, diametrically opposed, for playing down the value of the immense amount of material he had smuggled out to the West’⁴. The second aspect discusses the CIA-MI6 team’s operational activities and the mistakes made when handling Penkovsky’s case. This angle may offer an insight into the difficulties of the case and might mitigate some concerns about what went wrong in Penkovsky’s short career as a spy. This line of research might support the hypothesis that he was unintentionally exposed to the KGB surveillance and therefore, he was not working for them from the beginning⁵.

¹ GRU: Main Intelligence Directorate (Soviet military intelligence); Peter Deriabin and Jerrold Schecter, *The Spy Who Saved the World* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1992).

² Edward Jay Epstein, *Deception: The Invisible War Between the KGB and the CIA* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), after Len Scott, ‘Espionage and the cold war: Oleg Penkovsky and the Cuban missile crisis’, *Intelligence and National Security* 14, no. 3 (1999): 23.

³ David Gioe, ‘Handling HERO: joint Anglo-American tradecraft in the case of Oleg Penkovsky’, in *An International History of the Cuban Missile Crisis. A 50-year Retrospective*, ed. David Gioe, Christopher Andrew, and Len Scott (London: Routledge, 2014), 139.

⁴ Edward Crankshaw, ‘Foreword’, in Oleg Penkovsky, *The Penkovskiy papers* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965), vii.

⁵ KGB – Committee for State Security (Soviet secret police comprising foreign intelligence, counterintelligence, and other functions related to state security).

The last direction of research is based on limited information and analyses the KGB's fragmentary activities that might explain what happened to Penkovsky; whether he was arrested by the KGB, or withdrawn from an alleged Soviet disinformation operation. Penkovsky's arrival came at a moment when the opaqueness of the Soviet regime along with its leaders' 'adventurism' in foreign policy, coupled with the existing tense East-West relations, put him in the spotlight both before as well as during the first part of the Cuban Missile Crisis⁶. Penkovsky's life prior to his recruitment was marked by the ambivalent political context following the death of Stalin in 1953, interspersed with efforts to improve East-West relations and ideological perennial conflicts between communism and democracy. Improved relations started to be seen in 1955 when the US, France, the UK and the Soviet Union agreed on the issue of the neutrality and independence of Austria, and during talks (with limited impact though) to improve security in Europe. However, the upheavals crushed by the Soviet military in East Germany in 1953 and Hungary in 1956, and the creation in 1955 of the Warsaw Pact clearly defined the existence of two opposing fronts, one led by the US and the other by the Soviet Union. Around the time of Penkovsky's recruitment, the US-Soviet Union relations started to deteriorate and the downed U-2 spy plane over the Soviet Union in 1960 dashed any further prospect to improve relations during the Paris East-West Summit in May 1960.

To determine how relevant Penkovsky's actions were 'in saving the world', the three perspectives – Penkovsky's personal history, the CIA-MI6 handler team and the KGB – need to be analysed. Notable references used in this research include CIA declassified documents which provide information about the UK-US teams in charge of Penkovsky; Oleg Penkovsky's writings which help explain the realities regarding the functions and activities of the Soviet intelligence apparatus, with a focus on the GRU.

II. Penkovsky's life and motivation

The book by Jerrold Schecter and Peter Deriabin, 'The spy who saved the world', refers to Penkovsky as the man who saved the world. While this statement has been disputed, it has also opened the debate surrounding his motivations for trying to save the world. Penkovsky's early attempts to contact the West raised doubts about his real motivation that were shared by both the CIA and the MI6. Some consider that his actions were motivated by his 'own

⁶ John S. Reshetar, Jr., 'Reviewed Work(s): The Penkovskiy Papers by Oleg Penkovski', *The American Political Science Review* 60, no. 2 (1966), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1953375>; CIA-RDP75-00149R000600240016-6; "The Congressional Record – Senate", January 14, 1966, 244, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp75-00149r000600240016-6>.

perceived role in saving the world’ combined with a ‘deep conviction that he was serving the cause of human progress’⁷. Allegedly, such ideological preoccupations developed after he became affronted by the ‘size and magnitude and malevolence of the secret service he formed a part’ which made him ‘a zealot who wanted to be heard’⁸. However, to ascertain that Penkovsky’s motivation was simply ideological is naïve, as Penkovsky himself confesses in his memoirs that espionage life is rarely this rewarding. In light of this, we need to look for the relevant explanation in another place.

Penkovsky was ‘essentially a loner’ and a complex individual who desired ‘personal recognition’, asking, in one instance, the CIA-MI6 team for a meeting with the US president, or ‘to kiss the hand of the queen’, as well as requesting to be photographed in a United States Army and British colonel’s uniform (the latter granted)⁹. Penkovsky had a desire to be appreciated, and his ‘conceitedness’ was manifest even during his career as a Soviet Army officer as all his actions supported his intention to play a role in the Soviet leadership¹⁰. To ‘access General Gapanovich’s excellent Party contacts’, he pursued marriage with the general’s daughter, and he cultivated the friendship of Marshal Varentsov, who later arranged for his admission into the M.V. Frunze Military Academy (1945-1948)¹¹. He only became ‘disgusted with the Soviet Communist system’ after he made ‘a miscalculation during an assignment in Turkey’¹². During said deployment as assistant military attaché (1955-1956), Penkovsky arranged to have one of his colleagues declared *persona non grata* for espionage activities; he had had an argument with his general (the attachés’ office chief) over Moscow’s interdiction of operational activities, and he ‘complained to Moscow, using KGB rather than GRU channels’, which ‘shamed the GRU in front of its intelligence rival’¹³. The disagreement, which reached Khrushchev and the Central Committee of the Communist Party, resulted in no attaché office chief wanting to work with Penkovsky, followed by a thorough background check in 1959¹⁴. During the course of the investigation, KGB discovered that his father participated in the White Army fight against the Bolshevik revolution. This piece of information definitively derailed any prospects for advancement and led to Penkovsky’s disillusionment with the

⁷ Volkman, *Spies*, 27; Penkovsky, *The Penkovskiy Papers*, vii.

⁸ Penkovsky, *The Penkovskiy Papers*, x, 96.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9; Clarence Ashley, *CLA SpyMaster* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 2004), 194, 202.

¹⁰ Volkman, *Spies*, 27.

¹¹ Robins, ‘Penkovsky: Genuine Defector’, 180.

¹² Ashley, *CLA SpyMaster*, 194; Robins, ‘Penkovsky: Genuine Defector’, 180.

¹³ Ashley, *CLA SpyMaster*, 160; Robins, ‘Penkovsky: Genuine Defector’, 181.

¹⁴ CIA, ‘Concerning Penkovskiy memoirs’, Document Number: 0000012426, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/collection/lt-col-oleg-penkovsky-western-spy-soviet-gru?page=8>.

Soviet system and, ultimately, to his desire to betray it¹⁵.

After the revelations about his father's involvement in the White Army, Penkovsky remained part of the GRU, contrary to other cases when this led to an automatic dismissal from the intelligence service¹⁶. His marriage to a general's daughter and friendship with several Army generals might have mitigated this inconvenience, but nonetheless, his later assignment in 1960 under a civilian cover within the 'State Committee for Coordination of Scientific Research' (which involved travelling abroad) should have prompted strong KGB counter-reactions. His dismissal from the Army should have taken place despite his powerful friends, as the GRU chief, Ivan Aleksandrovich Serov, was appointed to this position after leading the KGB, which made him almost impervious to any influence. Why this did not happen remains a mystery which could support the hypothesis that he was not (dishonourably) discharged in order to give him the chance to redeem himself. Retrospectively, the information Penkovsky provided to the West makes this scenario highly unlikely since additional information suggests that Penkovsky 'detested Khrushchev and the Soviet leadership', in light of the fact that they were 'actively preparing to launch a nuclear war'¹⁷. In his view, such an intention would presumably be 'leading the world to destruction' in the Soviet attempt to pursue 'a final Armageddon to decide whether communism or capitalism would rule the world'¹⁸.

The hatred towards the Soviet system also came after the previous Soviet leadership, under Stalin, executed some of the greatest and most experienced military commanders of the Russian army¹⁹. These executions later led to Penkovsky's 'growing disillusion' over the 'frustrations of being subjected to the erratic demands of unappreciative politicians whom he considered both incompetent and irresponsible'²⁰. All these reasons seem genuine enough to explain why he became, as the Soviets stated at his trial, 'a morally decayed person [...] employed by the imperialist intelligence services', leading further credence to the idea that Penkovsky's actions in spying for the West were done in good faith²¹. Consequently, 'Penkovsky's desire to be the world's best spy' for the West, combined with his hatred of the Soviet regime, shaped his desire to save the world from communism and the Soviet military threat²².

¹⁵ Volkman, *Spies*, 26.

¹⁶ CIA, 'Biographic data on colonel Oleg Vladimirovich Penkovsky', <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp75-00149r000600290083-7>.

¹⁷ Crankshaw, 'Foreward', in Penkovsky, *The Penkovskiy papers*, xi.

¹⁸ George A. Brinkley, 'Penkovsky and his Papers', *The Review of Politics* 28, no. 2 (1966): 254; Volkman, *Spies*, 27.

¹⁹ CIA, 'Studies in intelligence (SINT)-vol 8 no 1 winter 1964-the Soviet high command', Document Number: 000007534, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/collection/lt-col-oleg-penkovsky-western-spy-soviet-gru?page=8>.

²⁰ Volkman, *Spies*, 26; Brinkley, 'Penkovsky and his Papers', 254.

²¹ Frank Gibney, 'General introduction', in Penkovsky, *The Penkovskiy papers*, 2.

²² Robins, 'Penkovsky: Genuine Defector', 187.

Another aspect of Penkovsky's actions that made people wary of him came from his prolonged attempts to contact Western intelligence services which could have been a 'sheer coincidence' as reaching out to West during 'the complex espionage atmosphere of the Cold War' was wrought with dangers²³. According to the early analyses conducted by the CIA, 'it seemed inconceivable that a man of Penkovsky's stature would want to spy for the West', especially after 'the embarrassment the GRU suffered following the exposure of Pyotr Popov'²⁴. Peter Wright (1987) corroborates the CIA's initial assessment about Penkovsky being a deception operation because his attempts came after a previous Soviet defector, Anatoliy Golitsin, warned the CIA that such a plan was in the works at the KGB. This deception plan was to be employed only after the KGB identified a penetration within the GRU, which it did, in the case of GRU Lieutenant Colonel Pyotr Popov, who was arrested and executed in 1959 for being a CIA asset. Furthermore, Penkovsky's offer to spy came at a low point for the MI6, when it needed 'a triumph' after a series of costly fiascos: 'rocked by the twin blows of Philby and George Blake, its morale desperately low after the Crabbe affair, and the disastrous Suez operations'²⁵. Similarly, the CIA was at the nadir after the failed April 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion²⁶.

Outside the convenient timing, Penkovsky's multiple attempts to contact the West could have been easily been categorised as a Soviet provocation and disinformation campaign because of how straightforward they were. In July 1960 (August 1960, by some accounts), Penkovsky made contact with two Russian-speaking American students in Moscow and gave them a package with sensitive information (which eventually reached the CIA). He did that simply by observing them and assuming they were American, based on 'their dress as well as their demeanour'²⁷. However, he considered the approach to have been a failure as 'two policemen walked by, prompting the Americans to walk away', and he was not contacted afterwards²⁸. In December 1960, Penkovsky continued his attempts to approach Western representatives, this time targeting a British businessman leaving the Soviet Union at the Moscow airport; Penkovsky offered him a package which was refused. In January 1961, Penkovsky's offer was again declined, this time by the Canadian Embassy Commercial Counsellor, William Van Vliet, who returned his package unopened two days later. Wright argues that the KGB likely knew about the meeting

²³ Peter Wright with Paul Greenglass, *Spycatcher* (Richmond, Australia: Heinemann, 1987), 192; Nancy Wood, 'Left in the cold: why Canada rebuffed a Soviet double agent', *Maclean's*, 11 Mar 1991, 16. <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A10448770/AONE?u=salcal2&sid=AONE&xid=b42683e1>.

²⁴ Volkman, *Spies*, 24; Robins, 'Penkovsky: Genuine Defector', 185, after Peter Deriabin and Jerrold Schecter, *The Spy Who Saved the World* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992).

²⁵ Wright, *Spycatcher*, 192; *Ibid*.

²⁶ Gioe, 'Handling HERO', 144.

²⁷ Ashley, *CLA SpyMaster*, 142;

²⁸ Robins, 'Penkovsky: Genuine Defector', 184.

between Van Vliet and Penkovsky based on recordings between the two from Penkovsky's trial.

All of Penkovsky's attempts to contact the West that were considered 'too forward' may be categorised as Soviet provocation as 'Penkovsky appeared to be operating in an extremely dangerous way', contrary to his intelligence officer experience²⁹. However, since Penkovsky thought his actions were unsuccessful, his multiple attempts to approach Western representatives appear justified. Eventually, he was officially recruited in April 1961, when the British businessman Greville Wynne arranged a meeting in London between Penkovsky and the CIA-MI6 team³⁰. These attempts could also be viewed as a remarkable exercise in intelligence tradecraft as engaging persons of interest did not lead to his exposure, unlike in other cases where embassy officials, following such actions, complained to the Soviets about such provocations. These actions also prove that before his recruitment, Penkovsky was of extraordinary operational value and could be successfully used in collecting top-secret intelligence³¹. This argument is further supported when Penkovsky describes how he obtained the missile-related documents, causing Wright to ironically describe his actions as 'more of James Bond than real life'³². Nevertheless, these traits speak to his value: his subsequent actions that sought to ensure the world would be safer from Soviet danger confirmed his initial willingness to put himself in danger to provide information for the West.

III. Information provided

The information Penkovsky sent to the West was proven to be accurate despite his critics' claims that 'he conspicuously failed to warn the West of the two most dangerous Soviet initiatives [...] the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, and the placement of missiles in Cuba a year later'³³. These failures could likely be explained by the 'communication plan with his case officers [which] was not robust enough to handle such fast-breaking developments'³⁴. During Penkovsky's first contact with the two American students in July 1960, he revealed that fourteen rockets fired at the U2 American spy plane with 'no direct hits', had 'destroyed one of their own [Soviet] MIG 19s in the area, killing

²⁹ Ashley, *CLA SpyMaster*, 148, 149.

³⁰ CIA, 'Why the Russians got hold of Wynne', Document number: 00149R000600280010, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp75-00149r000600280010-8>.

³¹ CIA, 'Penkovskiy case', Document Number: 0000012427, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/collection/lt-col-oleg-penkovsky-western-spy-soviet-gru?page=8>.

³² Wright, *Spycatcher*, 194.

³³ Jerrold L. Schechter, 'A Very Important Spy', *The New York Review of Books*, June 24, 1993, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1993/06/24/a-very-important-spy/>.

³⁴ Gioe, 'Handling HERO', 154.

the pilot’; he also relayed information about an RB-47 US intelligence aircraft which ‘had been shot down on an intelligence mission [...] in international waters’, and not over Soviet territory, as was initially claimed³⁵. Additionally, the package given to the students proved, without doubt, his espionage intentions, as it contained ‘the identities of sixty individuals posted worldwide – all high ranking, all future placements, all strategic intelligence officers’, some of them working or planning to work as ‘illegals’ in Western countries³⁶. Wright disputes the claim that Penkovsky’s information contained data about the ‘illegals’ program and states that it ‘consisted mostly of identifications of GRU officers around the world, nearly all of which were accurate and most of which were already known’³⁷. Wright’s statement is however contradicted by other authors as the package given to the students did contain biographical information about future non-official cover agents, and some of the information provided was validated with data from multiple intelligence sources of the Allied services. In either case, the overall assessment was that the information provided was something that the ‘Soviets would never give up as feed material in a dangle or provocation operation because it was too valuable’, consequently establishing the bona fides for Penkovsky³⁸.

Penkovsky’s informational value was also highly appreciated when during his meeting with his CIA-MI6 handlers in London he ‘identified the entire roster of the Soviet intelligence personnel in London for the SIS’, as well as ‘some five hundred GRU and probably more than two hundred KGB’; and informed his handlers about ‘the slashing of military pay, food shortages throughout the country, and the ensuing morale crisis in the Soviet Union’³⁹. When it came to the ‘missile gap’, the CIA had an ‘ongoing debate about the size, scope and significance of the Soviet military’⁴⁰. Penkovsky settled the question in his first London trip. He contradicted Nikita Khrushchev’s 1961 public statement on Soviet missile capabilities where he boasted “that his rockets could ‘hit a fly in space’”, and said that ‘they could not hit a bull in the backside with a balalaika’⁴¹. Penkovsky revealed that the Soviets had a limited number of missiles and that ‘none of them worked near their design parameters’⁴².

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Penkovsky’s role in influencing the political decision process was disputed, some considered that his contribution was significant, while others regarded him to be irrelevant. Some argued that his

³⁵ Ashley, *CLA SpyMaster*, 142.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁷ Wright, *Spycatcher*, 193.

³⁸ Gioe, ‘Handling HERO’, 139.

³⁹ Ashley, *CLA SpyMaster*, 192-193.

⁴⁰ Volkman, *Spies*, 25.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 26.

betrayal influenced both the Soviet and American leaders. Khrushchev was forced to let go of the Soviet nuclear superiority bluff while President Kennedy pursued a more balanced course of action in relation to the crisis⁴³. Throughout this tense time, the information provided earlier by Penkovsky's became more relevant since not only did it give 'detailed information on every operational missile in the arsenal of the USSR', but also included the manuals for the 'Soviet medium-range ballistic missiles (R-12 MRBMs, NATO Designation: SS-4 Sanda) and intermediate-range Ballistic Missiles (R-14 IRBMs, NATO Designation: SS-5 Shean)⁴⁴. This information combined with the 'CIA's own aerial photography of the Soviet missiles, revealed the type, the technical characteristics, the potential readiness and the capabilities' of the missiles deployed to Cuba⁴⁵. The missile manuals allowed 'the CIA's analysts to reach their conclusions with a high level of confidence', opposing the claims that 'Penkovsky had no discernible relation to the real assessments and actions of the United States government in the missile crisis'⁴⁶. Even though Penkovsky did not warn the Americans and British with regard to the Soviet nuclear missiles deployment to Cuba, he provided 'indicators and warnings' and also 'aided US National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC) analysts to recognize the field deployment pattern of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba', increasing the level of accuracy of their analytical products⁴⁷. Penkovsky's impact on political decision-making was reflected in the way his information 'properly analysed in National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs), enabled President John F. Kennedy (JFK) to take a measured approach to resolving the conflict that stopped short of direct military intervention in Cuba'⁴⁸. These missile details along with other political information Penkovsky offered about Khrushchev's opposition within the Communist Party, allowed Kennedy to react 'in a more decisive manner than was his custom'⁴⁹. Penkovsky consequently had a 'crucial role in providing information on Soviet missile capabilities and field deployment philosophy during the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962', although 'he had no real-time role', as, by the time the missile crisis unfolded, he had been arrested by the KGB⁵⁰. Gioe (2014) considers this criticism as being of low significance, arguing

⁴³ CIA, 'Penkovskiy Case', Document Number: 0000012378, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/collection/lt-col-oleg-penkovsky-western-spy-soviet-gru?page=8>.

⁴⁴ Ashley, *CLA SpyMaster*, 146; Gioe, 'Handling Hero', 136.

⁴⁵ Ashley, *CLA SpyMaster*, 225.

⁴⁶ Ibid.; McGeorge Bundy, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, 1989 statement, in Len Scott, 'Espionage and the cold war: Oleg Penkovsky and the Cuban missile crisis', *Intelligence and National Security* 14, no. 3 (1999): 23.

⁴⁷ Gioe, 'Handling HERO', 136-138.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 137.

⁴⁹ Ashley, *CLA SpyMaster*, 226.

⁵⁰ Ibid.; Charles Cogan and Len Scott, 'The CIA and Oleg Penkovsky, 1961-63', in *Exploring Intelligence Archives: Enquiries into the Secret State*, ed. R. Gerald Hughes, Peter Jackson and Len Scott (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 144.

that ‘if real-time intelligence is good, foreknowledge is better’, and Penkovsky offered the latter⁵¹. Penkovsky helped prevent a US invasion which would have crossed at that time a ‘Soviet ‘red line’ on retaliatory action’⁵². Reviewing Penkovsky’s role in the Cuban Missile Crisis, Schechter and Deriabin (1992) emphasised Penkovsky’s merits, referring to him as ‘the spy who saved the world’ because ‘for the first and, so far, the only recorded time in post-war history, human intelligence, supplied directly to the enemy, helped to tilt the course of world events’⁵³.

IV. Tradecraft

Another matter of concern in Penkovsky’s case was the CIA-SIS team’s tradecraft, which ‘was appallingly reckless for such a sensitive source’, employed either deliberately or as a consequence of the operation’s inherent limitations⁵⁴. Their tradecraft, either, stalled the relationship, caused Penkovsky’s early discovery, or was simply ignored by the KGB, assuming that Penkovsky was working for them. Contrary to Volkman (1994) who affirms that ‘both the CIA and MI6 had taken extraordinary precautions to protect Penkovsky’, Wright rightfully notes that ‘little attempt [was] made to protect him or preserve him as a long-term asset’, as demonstrated by the ‘seventeen hundred people in Britain alone [who] had access to Penkovsky’s material’, in addition to more than 150 in the United States⁵⁵. It would appear that it was more a matter of ‘joint tradecraft [...] insufficient to protect Penkovsky’, or more bluntly put of ‘operational schizophrenia with which his case was marked [and which] may have directly contributed to his remarkably short tenure as an intelligence agent’⁵⁶. Despite Penkovsky’s request ‘to observe all the rules of professional tradecraft and security and not permit any slip-ups’, the CIA used an inexperienced intelligence officer, codename Compass, in the early stages of the case development who ‘between August 1960 and April 1961, ... was not able to make a single signal or load a dead drop’⁵⁷. For example, ‘asked to call Penkovsky on a Sunday at ten o’clock, Compass called at eleven, speaking in a ‘mangled’ Russian with a message that was incomprehensible to Penkovsky’⁵⁸.

⁵¹ Gioe, ‘Handling HERO’, 137.

⁵² Ibid., 138.

⁵³ Gordon Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Birds: Soviet Postwar Defectors* (New York: Weidenfeld Nicolson, 1989), 163, in Gioe, ‘Handling HERO’, 138.

⁵⁴ Wright, *Spycatcher*, 194.

⁵⁵ Volkman, *Spies*, 28; Wright, *Spycatcher*, 194.

⁵⁶ Gioe, ‘Handling HERO’, 135.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 139, 140.

⁵⁸ CIA, *Memorandum for Chief SR Division, 10 May 1963, Subject: Oleg Penkovsky*, approved for released on 31 May 1992, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/0000012375>; Ashley, *CIA spymaster*, 149-150, in Gioe, ‘Handling HERO’, 141.

The mistakes continued with the joint CIA-MI6 handler team disregarding Penkovsky's request for 'impersonal communication' and planning Penkovsky's personal meetings with an 'operational novice'⁵⁹. The novice was the wife of the MI6 station chief, Roderick Chisholms, and, at that time, the mistake was considered by SIS a 'calculated risk', although the Chisholms 'had their diplomatic cover blown to the KGB as part of Blake's treachery'⁶⁰. The CIA-MI6 based their reasoning on the assumption that 'the KGB would not follow a diplomat's wife out for a stroll in the park with her children' even though the 'KGB was particularly adept at keeping close tabs on foreigners'⁶¹. Additionally, the meetings took place 'within walking distance from the Lubyanka KGB headquarters in Moscow' and 'more than a dozen times, long after both Penkovsky and Mrs. Chisholm had detected KGB surveillance of their movements'⁶². Penkovsky's warnings to his handlers were given on 21 April 1961 when the KGB noticed that 'American intelligence operations were observed to be concentrated in the Krasno Presnenskiy region of Moscow' where Penkovsky's meetings would take place, but no changes were made to remedy the situation⁶³. Wright surmises that all these intelligence failures in Moscow did not trigger a KGB response because 'Penkovsky had to be the deception operation of which Golitsin had learned in 1959'; however, this remains only an assumption⁶⁴.

Additional failures include the questionable quality of the personnel used in the CIA-MI6 team and their operational training. One of Penkovsky's handlers was 'overly verbose' and instead of keeping a low profile during the Paris meetings, he 'paid for champagne for the entire bar' and 'had been talking loudly with the locals and creating a scene'⁶⁵. The CIA-MI6 team members were also in conflict with each other, the conflict being 'more personality-driven than owing to any difference in CIA versus SIS tradecraft doctrine or competing operational ideologies'⁶⁶. Their tradecraft in the Paris mission was also faulty as the team would mix official with non-official cover stories, establish surveillance detection routes that were too short and select improper operational sites⁶⁷. The reality is that both the CIA and MI6 were responsible for multiple failures, but this does not mean that on the other side, everything was done perfectly by the KGB. In hindsight, the KGB had to have been investigating Penkovsky prudently because in the Soviet system where favouritism was the predominant

⁵⁹ Gioe, 'Handling HERO', 148.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 149; CIA, *Operational instructions*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/0000012405>.

⁶² Gioe, 'Handling HERO', 150; Wright, *Spycatcher*, 194.

⁶³ CIA, *Transcript of meeting 2, 21 April 1961*, in Gioe, 'Handling HERO', 158.

⁶⁴ Wright, *Spycatcher*, 192.

⁶⁵ Gioe, 'Handling HERO', 145, 156, 157.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 157.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 155.

characteristic, even the chief of the GRU (Serov) was in debt to Penkovsky after he helped Serov's wife and daughter visit and shop in London⁶⁸. Overall, the poor tradecraft showcased by the CIA and MI6 does not support the assumption that Penkovsky was a deception operation, and consequently, the KGB let their surveillance operation continue. In spite of the obvious CIA and MI6 shortcomings, Penkovsky was still able to provide top-secret information which helped them counteract the Soviets' operations against the West.

V. Penkovsky's arrest

The last act in Penkovsky's attempt to save the world was his arrest and trial, the latter well documented by the KGB; but what triggered the arrest is still a matter of debate⁶⁹. The undisclosed circumstances surrounding Penkovsky's arrest raised questions about his role – either as an actor operating out of his conviction as a 'soldier for peace', or only as 'an unwitting Soviet conduit of disinformation'⁷⁰. Penkovsky's arrest on the 22 October 1962, when the Cuban Missile Crisis reached its climax, was allegedly a 'combination of diligent KGB counterintelligence work, a drunken U.S. Army sergeant and a bad operational mistake by MI6'⁷¹. Lana Robins (2016) disagrees with both the surveillance theory (by which the KGB identified the meetings between Penkovsky and Janet Chisholm by accident) and the drunken U.S. Army soldier / the intelligence adviser to the Joint Chiefs of Staff who worked for the Soviets. Robins was of the opinion that the last two were too low level in the intelligence apparatus to have had access to the details of such a sensitive operation. Robins theorises that there might have been another high-level mole, never identified, in the CIA or MI6, who disclosed Penkovsky's betrayal and as a result, Penkovsky 'likely came under Soviet control in the spring of 1962' unbeknownst to himself⁷². However, this possibility is only an assumption because, despite Penkovsky's reporting the surveillance in March 1962, other explanations for why he was allowed to continue could equally be true⁷³. The March 1962

⁶⁸ CIA, 'Penkovskiy operation, parts 3 and 4 – taped 22 October 1966', Document Number: 0000012428, 4, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/collection/lt-col-oleg-penkovsky-western-spy-soviet-gru?page=8>.

⁶⁹ CIA, 'Possible developments in the trials of Oleg Penkovskiy and Greville Wynne', Document Number: 0000012374, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/collection/lt-col-oleg-penkovsky-western-spy-soviet-gru?page=8>.

⁷⁰ Ernest Volkman, *Spies. The Secret Agents Who Changed the Course of History* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1994), 24; Lana Robins, 'Penkovsky: Genuine Defector Turned Unwitting Soviet Agent of Disinformation', *Journal of Strategy and Politics* 3 (2016): 196.

⁷¹ Volkman, *Spies*, 29.

⁷² Robins, 'Penkovsky: Genuine Defector', 197.

⁷³ CIA, 'Memorandum on counterintelligence activities', <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/collection/lt-col-oleg-penkovsky-western-spy-soviet-gru?page=7>.

surveillance could have been a preliminary one, during a routine check, which would explain the obvious, unsophisticated tactics used; or equally possibly, the KGB needed time to make sure it did not stumble into a sanctioned GRU operation against the West. Disregarding all these warning signs, Penkovsky continued, to the best of his knowledge, to help the West. The long-lasting implications of his actions were seen in the aftermath of his arrest: the GRU was reorganised, General Serov was demoted and approximately 300 officers from their posts abroad were recalled⁷⁴. These aspects correlated with other information provided earns Penkovsky, if not the credit for ‘saving the world’, at least the recognition that he tried to mitigate the Soviet threat and strived for a world free from communist oppression.

VI. Conclusion

The available evidence suggests that Penkovsky was a genuine spy who provided the West with credible top-secret information regarding Soviet nuclear capabilities and Khrushchev’s political intentions. He was a sincere and highly-motivated individual and despite all the questions that remain unanswered, he genuinely helped the West to fight communism expansion. Penkovsky’s major contribution led to the identification of the Soviet missile sites in Cuba and of their levels of operational readiness, which indirectly enabled President Kennedy to act with confidence and from a position of strength during his negotiations with the Soviet leadership. While Penkovsky’s intelligence was only a part of all the relevant information which mitigated the Soviet threat during the tense 1962 crisis, the fact that just one man was able to play such a crucial role is quite extraordinary. Penkovsky did not save the world, but it can be said with almost complete certainty that he helped the world avoid a catastrophic outcome.

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⁷⁴ Ibid., 204; CIA, ‘Penkovsky spy trial sings reds’, Document number: 00149R000600290019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp75-00149r000600290019-8>.

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