**The U.N.: Russia's den of spies**

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At the center of the Russian spy ring rounded up this week by federal agents were two Russian handlers from Moscow's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), the successor to the KGB, who managed a network of sleeper agents out of their upper East Side Manhattan offices at the Russian mission to the United Nations.

Described in court documents simply as Russian Government Official #2 and Russian Government Official #3, the two intelligence agents, posing as low level-Russian diplomats, passed on hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash and maintained secret communications with Russian "illegals" -- spies operating outside the protection of official cover -- sent to America to influence U.S. policymakers and send intelligence reports back to headquarters.

The federal investigation into the Russian spy network, which was detailed in more than 50 pages of court documents, opened a window into a highly secretive effort by President Dmitry Medvedev's government to gain access to influential political and business figures in the United States. But in some ways, Russia's decision to use Turtle Bay as a base for espionage is an old story.

The Russian mission to the United Nations has been at the center of Moscow's sprawling intelligence gathering operations in the United States for decades, providing Soviet and Russian operatives with ideal circumstances to infiltrate U.S. diplomatic missions, businesses, and circles of political elites. Some of the most important Soviets to defect were also based at the United Nations, including Arkady Schevchenko, a former top-ranking U.N. official who defected to the U.S. in 1978, and Sergei Tretyakov, one of the top spymasters posted at the Russian mission from 1995 to 2000.

During the Cold War, the U.S. limited Soviet officials' freedom to travel to a 25-mile radius around the U.N. headquarters building. The Soviets used it to great effect, erecting a massive listening station in its U.N. mission, and purchasing an apartment complex for Russian diplomats in the Bronx and a beach mansion on Long Island for visitors and vacationing Russian diplomats. "The rooftops at Glen Cove, the apartment building in Riverdale and the mission all bristled with antennas for listening to American conversations," Schevchenko wrote in his book Breaking with Moscow.

Russia is by no means the only country that spies at the United Nations. The United States and Britain have long collected information on the positions of U.N. members. At the founding U.N. conference in San Francisco in 1945, U.S. Secretary of State Edward Stettinius routinely reviewed the secret diplomatic cables sent by his colleagues to foreign capitals. The U.S. Army Signal Security Agency, the forerunner of the National Security Agency, forced commercial telegraph companies to hand over hundreds of pages of secret diplomatic messages, according toStephen C. Schlesinger in his book The Act of Creation.

In the years prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, U.S. and allied intelligence infiltrated the U.N.'s weapons inspection agency in Iraq, planting listening devices that that picked up microwave stations transmitted communications from Saddam Hussein's security detail. Charles Duelfer, the top American official on the U.N. inspection team, held daily conversations with the CIA. Before the war, a British translator provided the Observer newspaper with a National Security Agency memo requesting a "surge" in eavesdropping on Security Council members during a debate on authorizing the use of force against Iraq.

The extent of Soviet spying came to light at the height of the Cold War, in the mid 1970s, when Vice President Nelson Rockefeller headed up a commission looking into spying abuses by the CIA on American soil. The study turned up troubling evidence of Soviet surveillance. "We believe these countries [belonging to the communist bloc] can monitor and record thousands of private telephone conversations," the Rockefeller Commission wrote in its report. "Americans have a right to be uneasy if not seriously disturbed at the very real possibility that their personal and business activities, which they discuss freely over the telephone, could be recorded or analyzed by agents of a foreign power."

Two Soviet officials, Nikolai Fochine and Arkady Schevchenko, dealing with U.N. political matters in the mid-1970s, "seemed to be in a 24 hour a day competition to be first to relay the output of my office to the Soviet delegation," wrote Brian Urquhart, former under secretary-general of the U.N., in his memoir, A Life in War and Peace. Urquhart didn't know it at the time, but Schevchenko had been spying for the CIA as well. Moscow's espionage was so pervasive that top Soviet officials were routinely barred from access to highly sensitive information. Urquhart, who had once served himself as British intelligence officer during World War II, informed Fochine that he knew he "would have to report to the Soviet Mission and that he would sometimes therefore have to withhold information from him. Fochine accepted this without demure," wrote Urquhart's successorMarrack Goulding, in his book Peacemonger.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who served as U.S. President Gerald Ford's ambassador to the United Nations from 1975 to 1976, wrote in his book A Dangerous Place that Russian intercepts and wiretaps constituted "the most massive illegal invasion of Fourth Amendment rights in American history."

"In 1975, when I was named permanent representative to the United Nations, Vice President Nelson Rockefeller summoned me to his office in the Old Executive Building," Moynihan wrote a decade later in a Popular Mechanics article entitled "How The Soviets Are Bugging America."

"There was something urgent he had to tell me. The first thing I must know about the United Nations, he said, is that the Soviets would be listening to every telephone call I made from our mission and from the ambassadors suite in the Waldorf Towers."

For decades, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has run a massive counterintelligence operation out of Manhattan, which monitors foreign spying operations by U.N.-based agents from Russia and many other countries. Periodically, the bureau expels some. In October 1986, the United States asked 55 Soviet diplomats to leave the country, including "operatives for intercepting communications," the New York Times reported.

But the sleuthing persisted well beyond the demise of the Soviet Union. Former President Boris Yeltsin's government continued to aggressively spy on American targets in New York. Tretyakov's efforts to expand Russia's intelligence gathering capacity were documented in the book Comrade J., written together with former Washington Post reporter Peter Earley.

"The SVR was not interested in anything that concerned U.N. politics, U.N. resolutions, or other political U.N. bullshit," Tretyakov recounted. "Instead, Sergei and his men were ordered to penetrate intelligence targets and recruit spies who could steal political, economic, technical, counterintelligence, and military secrets."

Russian intelligence masters in Moscow outlined a list of nine targets, starting with the No. 1 priority: "Penetrating the U.S. mission." Other influential diplomatic missions, including Britain, China, France, Germany, and Japan were also on the list. But the Russian spies were also charged with snooping on New York political elites, particularly congressional figures, and key think tanks, including the Council on Foreign Relations. They also targeted Wall Street bigwigs, Manhattan banks, and scholars and foreign journalists, particularly those covering the United Nations.

In the latest case, federal investigator monitored the Russian operation over several years. In 2004, Russian Government Official #2 was filmed by federal agents at the Forest Hills Train station in the Queens section of New York as he handed off a package filled with cash to Christopher R. Metsos, one of 10 sleeper agents arrested this week, according to court documents. The videotape showed the Russian handler, a second secretary at the Russian mission to the U.N., and Metsos carrying identical orange bags as they approached the train stairway, where they made the switch. "I believe that Russian Government Official #2's orange bag contained a large sum of money," a federal agent said, according to court documents.

Metsos, who claims to be a Canadian citizen, was detained in Cyprus after trying to catch a plane to Budapest, Hungary. He has been released on bail but has been asked to remain in Cyprus pending a U.S. request for extradition.

The Queens "brush-pass" was only one of several incidents involving the Russian handlers, who met with their secret operatives at a series of New York City landmarks, parks, train stations, and restaurants. Last summer, Russian Government Official #3, a third secretary at the Russian mission to the United Nations, was filmed at a Harlem train station passing as much as $300,000 and a computer memory drive to Richard Murphy, another alleged sleeper agent identified by federal agents. The money was then collected was shared among a large group of Russian agents, who collected their cut in Central Park, a restaurant in Sunny Side, Queens, and Fort Greene Park in Brooklyn. A portion was buried in a field in upstate New York for two years, before being dug up and passed on to other Russian agents.

It remains unclear whether the ring collected any valuable intelligence. Court documents accuse them not of engaging in espionage but of simply violating U.S. laws that require agents of a foreign power to register with the U.S. government.

The Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement denouncing the U.S. arrests. "These actions are unfounded and pursue unseemly goals," according to the statement. "We don't understand the reasons which prompted the United States Department of Justice to make a public statement in the spirit of Cold War spy stories."