

## How Moscow Undermined the Warren Commission

*By Max Holland*

The *Warren Report* has never been impeached, yet conspiracy theories persist, nay thrive, after 40 years. It's fair to ask why.

The most important reason remains the factor that spawned wild speculation in the first place, namely, the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald two days after the Kennedy assassination by a self-appointed vigilante named Jack Ruby. The assassination was a horrific act, yet one that the American public would have eventually come to terms with had Oswald -- a politicized sociopath, akin to Timothy McVeigh -- ever received his day in court.

But the right to due process is so cherished by Americans that when this ritual is denied, ineradicable doubt flourishes no matter how damning the state's case.

The unavoidable corollary of disbelief is that Washington was, at a minimum, uninterested in catching the real culprits. It's no coincidence that polls consistently have shown that public trust in the U.S. government began declining in 1964. Among those who believe in a conspiracy, the most widely accepted theory is that elements of the U.S. government, most conspicuously the CIA, were complicit in gunning down the 35th president in broad daylight.

How is it that Americans have come to embrace a conspiracy theory that reads like a script written by the KGB, the CIA's mortal Cold War adversary? Well, it turns out that Moscow's relentless propagation of that virulent theory and its prevalence here are no mere coincidence. One of the more amazing stories to seep out of the former Soviet empire is the role Moscow played in exploiting Americans' psychological vulnerability after the assassination, and in preying on their devotion to due process. We can piece together this concerted effort only now with the release of documents from Soviet archives -- some disclosures authorized, some not. Taken together, they prove that the KGB played a central, pernicious role in fomenting the belief that the CIA was involved in Kennedy's assassination.

The first inkling of an aggressive KGB posture is revealed in a document gratuitously cited by Boris Yeltsin in his 1994 memoir. In a letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union dated November 23, 1963 -- when Oswald was still alive -- KGB Chairman Vladimir Semichastny recommends publishing in a "progressive paper in one of the Western countries," an article "exposing the attempt by reactionary circles in the USA to remove the responsibility for the murder of Kennedy from the real

criminals, [i.e.,] the racists and ultraright elements guilty of the spread and growth of violence and terror in the United States.”

Two months later, R. Palme Dutt, the Stalinist editor of a Communist-controlled British journal called *Labour Monthly*, published an article that raised the specter of CIA involvement without offering a scintilla of evidence. “[M]ost commentators,” he wrote, “have surmised a coup of the Ultra-Right or racialists of Dallas. That may be; but the trail, if followed up seriously, seems to reach wider . . . on the face of it this highly organized coup (even to the provision of a ‘fall guy’ . . . and rapid killing of the fall guy while manacled in custody, as soon as there appeared a danger of his talking), with the manifest complicity necessary of a very wide range of authorities, bears all the hallmarks of a CIA job.”

Five months later, in June 1964, a freelance journalist named Joachim Joesten posited a strikingly similar analysis in his book *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?* Following a chapter on “Oswald and the CIA,” Joesten asserted that the agency was beyond presidential control and bitterly opposed to Kennedy’s policy of “easing the Cold War.” It has long been a matter of record that Joesten’s book was the first published in the United States on the subject of the assassination. Until the notes of a former KGB archivist named Vasili Mitrokhin were published in 1999, however, it was not known that Joesten’s publisher, the small New York firm of Marzani & Munsell, received subsidies totaling \$672,000 from the Central Committee of the Communist Party in the early 1960s.

These early efforts to implicate the CIA met with little apparent success. But the KGB kept on trying and finally hit the jackpot once a relatively unknown New Orleans district attorney named Jim Garrison took a sudden interest in the assassination in late 1966. The word “dupe” has long been out of favor, but that’s precisely what Garrison turned out to be after he arrested Clay Shaw in March 1967 and charged him with conspiring to assassinate Kennedy. Owing to a clever piece of KGB [disinformation](#) planted in *Paese Sera*, a Communist-owned Italian newspaper, Garrison came to believe that in Shaw he had apprehended an important “CIA operative.” And on the basis of this deception (again, revealed by KGB archivist Mitrokhin), Garrison constructed an entire conspiracy edifice, ultimately arguing that the CIA had plotted the assassination-coup d’etat in concert with the military-industrial complex -- again, because Kennedy was allegedly easing up in the Cold War.

If Garrison’s persecution of Shaw hadn’t been genuine, and tragic, the whole episode would be risible. It wasn’t. Garrison altered forever the parameters of Americans’ nagging doubts, though that transformation went largely unnoticed at the time. Before the spring of 1967, not even the *Warren Report*’s harshest critics dared suggest the government itself was involved. Within the space of a few weeks, Garrison single-handedly legitimated the fable of CIA complicity. Not even Shaw’s exoneration in 1971 was sufficient to offset the insidious notion planted by the KGB and unwittingly nurtured by Garrison. After receiving an inadvertent assist from the Watergate and intelligence hearings of the mid-1970s, the KGB could justifiably claim, by the end of the decade,

that owing to its “active measures,” more Americans believed in its conspiracy theory (or some variation thereof) than in the findings of the Warren Commission.

This preposterous allegation of CIA involvement might have faded with time but for a chance encounter in a Havana elevator between the publisher of Garrison’s 1988 memoir and a powerful Hollywood director named Oliver Stone. In [JFK](#), Stone reconstructs Jim Garrison’s edifice so painstakingly that 88 minutes into the movie, the KGB disinformation resurfaces. Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) hands Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones) the Italian newspaper clipping, and the implication is created that Shaw was a “contract agent for the Central Intelligence Agency.” Arguably, Stone’s 1991 movie is the only American feature film made during the Cold War to have, as its very axis, a lie concocted in the KGB’s [disinformation](#) factories.

If and when the archives of the Communist Party’s “sword and shield” are fully opened, the KGB’s indispensable role in propagating the lie of CIA involvement will take its place among other triumphs of Russian deception, such as the infamous Czarist forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Until then there is only this sobering thought, long an axiom of professional intelligence officers: We are never truly deceived by others; we only deceive ourselves.