

The Assassin as Political Pilgrim

By Priscilla Johnson McMillan

The Interloper: Lee Harvey Oswald Inside the Soviet Union

Peter Savodnik

Basic Books. 267 pp. \$27.99

Editor's Note: In the half-century since President Kennedy's death, one arm is capable of holding all the reliable works that attempt to understand the assassination by understanding the assassin. Two of the most outstanding in this niche are Jean Davison's [Oswald's Game](#) (1983) and Norman Mailer's [Oswald's Tale](#) (1995), the latter notable for the author's negotiated access to the Minsk KGB's file on and surveillance of Lee Harvey Oswald.

*Yet the book against which all such efforts must be measured is Priscilla Johnson McMillan's [Marina and Lee](#), which is being reissued this fall by the [Steerforth Press](#). As Thomas Powers observed in his 1977 New York Times review, *Marina and Lee* was a "miraculous book . . . miraculous because McMillan had the wit, courage, and perseverance to go back to the heart of the story and the art to give it life." McMillan restored agency to Oswald, and by so doing left no room for the tapestry of conspiracy theories that had been woven around him, possible only so long as he remained a cipher. So rich was the book's texture that when Mailer sat down to write his Oswald biography, he quoted long passages from *Marina and Lee* verbatim, and in his acknowledgments wrote that a "special statement is necessary to cover the contribution of Priscilla Johnson McMillan."^[1]*

*The 50th anniversary is ripe for another look at Oswald, if only because the end of the cold war opened a window for reportage that had not been possible earlier. What is not explicable or defensible is Peter Savodnik's calculated neglect of Marina and Lee in *The Interloper*. Savodnik, regrettably, did not think he could pull off his book without pretending that McMillan's book did not exist.*

*Despite this shabby behavior, *The Interloper* is one of the few books deserving of attention on this anniversary. Washington Decoded asked Priscilla Johnson McMillan, a member of its editorial board, for her considered opinion.*

The Interloper may be the one book appearing this year that attempts to understand the Kennedy assassination by taking a microscopic look at the assassin. The result is a nuanced and sympathetic view of Lee Harvey Oswald, a view so human that it crowds out and leaves no room for mechanistic theories of a conspiracy.

The author, Peter Savodnik, is a Russian-speaking writer who spent many months in Minsk, the city in which Oswald lived during most of his 2½ years in the Soviet Union. There, Savodnik interviewed Erich Titovets, a man who knew Oswald fairly well, and the very few others who remember the interloper who arrived in 1960 hoping to remain forever. Savodnik even traveled to Israel to interview Ella German, the attractive Jewish woman whose rejection of Oswald's marriage proposal in January 1961 had much to do with the American's rejection of Soviet life and eventual decision to return to the United States.

Savodnik sees Oswald as a seeker after something affirmative who, in reaction against a childhood of moving from place to unhappy place with a selfish, unstable mother, longed for a home and steady sense of purpose. But Oswald wanted something more. He was a Marxist who idealized the Soviet Union as a country that treated all of its citizens equally and provided baseline amenities to everyone. What he found instead was a bureaucracy such as he had encountered in the Marine Corps and 'round the clock surveillance by the KGB. He recorded his hopes and disappointments in his "Historic Diary" and in "The Collective," several essays he wrote while in Minsk.

Naturally, Savodnik uses Oswald's writing to trace his feelings about his life in the USSR and concludes that he felt isolated and alone, having failed to connect and find a place for himself within the society he had idealized from afar. It was in Minsk, Savodnik says, that Oswald realized that he would always be an outsider, an interloper, and where the "desperation and fury coursing through his whole life were most fully on display." Savodnik goes so far as to say that if the reader understands Oswald's life in Minsk, he or she will understand much about how the Kennedy assassination came about.

This claim is a stretch: the anger and violence that were to characterize Oswald's behavior after his return to the United States were barely visible during his time in Minsk.

Unaccountably, Savodnik scarcely mentions two sources that also deal at length with this period in Oswald's life: Norman Mailer's *Oswald's Tale*, and this reviewer's *Marina and Lee*. He uses the stories of four former intelligence officers from the US and the USSR to explain the way the Russians wove a "kolpak," or cocoon, around the foreigner, while Mailer, to great effect, simply quoted from the intelligence reports and wiretap/bug transcripts themselves. As for this reviewer's book, Savodnik speculates for 2½ pages about the age at which Oswald, as a boy, became a Marxist. Yet Oswald told this reviewer, in a widely quoted 1959 interview, "I became a Marxist at fifteen. I was looking for a key to my environment." These are mere examples, but one wonders why an author who truly wanted to do a complete job would ignore mountains of evidence that were already there.[\[2\]](#)

Had he looked at these earlier books he would also have seen that Oswald's time in Minsk was not so desolate after all. Although Savodnik does not mention it, he was taken into the family of Alexander Ziger, an older man who worked at the same factory and became a father figure to Oswald. In Pavel Golovachev, he found a close friend who was like a brother (the fact that Golovachev was forced to report to the KGB did not prevent this). Because Oswald was a foreigner, he was given enormous privileges—a job, a good apartment, a generous cash subsidy, and exemption from the rules imposed on Soviet citizens. He had a fair number of girlfriends; other friends he invited to his apartment; and, after his marriage to Marina Prusakova in April 1961, her family and friends. He clearly had a community. He even had friends who cared enough about him, despite the danger of KGB detection, to counsel him to leave the country before Khrushchev's liberalizing policies were reversed and he might be unable ever to leave. Marina observed that by the time she and Oswald had dealt with the red tape required to leave Russia and emigrate to the United States, the steam had gone out of Oswald's desire to go home. He had a baby daughter now, he felt settled, and he was afraid the US government might prosecute him for his one-time offer to give radar secrets to the Russians. It was not, as Peter Savodnik says, that Oswald felt himself a failure. It was bureaucratic momentum and his fear of losing face that made him go through with his return to America.

Oswald's initial decision to leave and his taking the first steps were caused, Savodnik correctly points out, by Ella German's rejection of him. But this example shows that the central mechanism of Oswald's personality was not the positive one of seeking or reaching out, but the negative one of rejecting. He joined the Marine Corps (as did his brothers) to reject his mother, went to Soviet Russia to reject his country, and returned to the United States to reject the Soviet Union. He had never had it so good as in Minsk, and still he left. Back in the United States, he sank into anger and despair and began, as he had done only three or four times in Russia, to beat Marina. "From the wreckage of his Soviet adventure," Savodnik says, "something calamitous was inevitable."

Savodnik thinks that Oswald killed President Kennedy because he considered himself a failure, and felt that there was nothing else for him to do. But writing only about

Oswald in Minsk, Savodnik doesn't see that Oswald had been a political actor all his life—from the moment he grabbed that Rosenbergs leaflet in New York at the age of fifteen, then rode to high school in the segregated section of the New Orleans buses in the 1950s, and later, passed out Fair Play for Cuba pamphlets in 1963. He was a political actor when he shot at [General Edwin A. Walker](#) in April 1963, and missed. He liked President Kennedy, but shot and killed him because he wanted to bring down American capitalism.

The merits of this book are considerable. For example, the author takes pains to place Oswald in his own time. He points out that the country Oswald came back to in 1962 was not the United States he had left in 1959. Instead of the tiredness of the late Eisenhower years, the nation now had a new and confident president and hope for abatement of the cold war. Savodnik sees Oswald as the anti-hero, against John Kennedy's hero.

If this view of Lee Harvey Oswald has a touch of romance about it, Savodnik has at least brought the assassin closer and made him a human being. His Oswald is not a puppet manipulated by dark, conspiratorial forces. He is the dark force himself.

[1] Thomas Powers, "[The Heart of the Story](#)," *New York Times Book Review*, 30 October 1977; Norman Mailer, *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (New York: Random House, 1995), xxi.

[2] Savodnik, *Interloper*, 9-11; Priscilla Johnson McMillan, *Marina and Lee* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 62; see also Priscilla Johnson, "'The Stuff of Which Fanatics Are Made,'" *Boston Globe*, 24 November 1963 ([Johnson Exhibit No. 3](#), 20 WCV 290-291).