

The strange case of accused US counterspy Robert Hanssen

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The arrest of Robert Hanssen by the Federal Bureau of Investigation on charges of counterespionage represents a major crisis for the US intelligence apparatus. Hanssen, 56, was an FBI agent for 25 years and worked in the bureau's foreign counterintelligence department. Detained last month, he is accused of spying on behalf of the Soviet Union and then Russia over the course of 15 years.

A closed Senate Intelligence Committee hearing into the case opening February 28 took testimony in an effort to establish how Hanssen's alleged spying went undetected for so long. Committee Chairman Senator Richard Shelby commented, "If the spy-catcher were to turn out to be the spy, you've got problems." By all accounts, this is precisely the problem the FBI has with Hanssen.

It is, of course, always difficult to establish the truth in such matters, because of the inherently secretive nature of intelligence agencies and the murky character of their activities. Moreover, any interpretation of what has been reported must be conditioned by a critical attitude toward the information released by the government and the media, which is bound to be colored by the interests of American capitalism in general, and its intelligence and foreign policy agencies in particular.

Nevertheless, the very charge that Hanssen worked as a counterspy is a damaging acknowledgment of serious problems within the US intelligence community. Aside from the considerable damage to American spy efforts that reputedly resulted from Hanssen's activities, the case bespeaks, at the very least, a degree of disaffection and alienation within highly sensitive state agencies that must be a cause of serious concern within US ruling circles.

Hanssen's alleged defection to Russian intelligence was by no means unique among US agents in the mid-1980s. The most notorious case was that of Aldrich Ames, the head of CIA Russian counterintelligence, who was imprisoned for life in 1994 for spying for the Soviet Union and Russia from 1985 to 1994. Another agent, Edward Lee Howard, who was fired from the CIA in 1983, fled the US for Russia in 1985 to avoid prosecution for counterespionage.

It is ironic, and perhaps politically significant, that Hanssen, like Ames, is reported to have made his first approach to Soviet intelligence in 1985, at the height of the Reagan years and the resurgence of Cold War demagoguery that accompanied them. That important elements of the US intelligence establishment should go over to the "enemy" within such a political context suggests all the more the presence of deep fault lines beneath the official image of American confidence and invincibility.

The year 1985 also marked the coming to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in the USSR, and the beginning of his liberalization program associated with the terms "glasnost" and "perestroika."

Within the US intelligence community, whose principal function was to conduct clandestine warfare against the Soviets, Gorbachev's gestures to democracy and his inclination toward pro-capitalist market reforms may have had a destabilizing effect. It is certainly conceivable that an FBI intelligence agent might feel his old Cold War belief system shaken by the new developments in the Soviet Union, and hence be more prone, under conditions of personal or family crisis, to go over to the "other side."

According to the FBI, Hanssen, in a letter to his Russian handlers in June 2000, wrote, "The US can be errantly likened to a powerfully built but retarded child, potentially dangerous, but young, immature and easily manipulated." Whether from the left or the right, these words express disaffection from the political establishment that Hanssen was nominally serving.

In a statement to the press on February 20, FBI Director Louis Freeh characterized the consequences of Hanssen's actions for US intelligence as "exceptionally grave." Hanssen has not been fully debriefed, but FBI sources say what they know about his activities cannot fully account for the security breaches uncovered so far, and that there may be other moles working in the bureau still to be uncovered. At the time of Hanssen's arrest, another half-dozen agents were under observation on suspicion of working for the Russians.

According to press accounts, in 15 years of spying for the Soviet Union and then Russia, Hanssen delivered to Moscow 6,000 pages of documents and 26 computer disks detailing the bureau's "sources and methods," including its most up-to-date techniques for electronic eavesdropping.

Government prosecutors allege that one of Hanssen's first acts of counterespionage was to hand over the names of three KGB agents secretly working for the Americans—two of whom were later executed in Moscow. He was allegedly paid \$600,000 in cash and diamonds for his services and was told there was another \$800,000 waiting for him in Russia. Known to his handlers only by such code names as "Ramon" and "B," Hanssen repeatedly refused requests to meet face to face with Russian agents, according to prosecutors.

US officials told the press last weekend that Hanssen also may have tipped off the KGB to the existence of a secret tunnel beneath the Soviet Embassy in Washington operated jointly by the FBI and the National Security Agency for electronic eavesdropping.

On first appearances, Hanssen seems to have been an unlikely candidate for the role of counterspy. He was known to his friends and work associates as a devout Catholic and avowed anticommunist, and many expressed disbelief when his alleged spying activities were reported. What was it that purportedly drove this individual to lead the double life of an FBI-KGB agent?

Hanssen was born in 1944, the only child of a Chicago cop. After receiving a degree in chemistry from a small liberal arts college in Illinois, he considered dentistry and then switched to accounting, receiving a master of business administration in 1971. In college he also studied Russian with a Yugoslav immigrant as his tutor. He worked briefly as an accountant, but then joined the Chicago Police Department in October 1972.

He was assigned to the department's elite C-5 undercover unit, which worked to ferret out corrupt police officers. Jack Clarke, a security consultant for the C-5 unit who thought Hanssen overqualified for police work, suggested that he put in an application with the FBI, and he joined the bureau in January 1976. He worked in Indiana and New York City before being transferred to FBI headquarters in Washington DC in 1981.

Much of his early work in the bureau drew on his accounting background and involved relatively mundane duties—preparing budget requests to Congress, tracking white-collar crime, setting up an automated database to monitor foreign officials assigned to the US. He also spent two years in the Soviet analytical unit. In 1985 he was reassigned to New York City, and in 1986 became a supervisor of one of the area's two dozen foreign counterintelligence squads.

The monetary compensation Hanssen is alleged to have received could well have been an incentive for him to offer his services to the Russians. In the mid-1980s, rookie FBI agents in New York earned only \$25,000 and the average salary was about \$40,000. With the high cost of living in the city, some agents were forced to live as far away as Pennsylvania to find affordable housing. By 1988 some 300 FBI positions were unfilled, as agents left the bureau to earn more money. A 25 percent pay increase was authorized for New York agents that same year to counteract staff shortages.

When Hanssen returned to New York City in 1985 he was earning about \$46,000, and had six children, whom he wanted to send to private Catholic schools. Former neighbors in Westchester County recalled that the family pinched pennies. “Westchester is a tough place to live if you don't have a lot of money,” one commented. Within a week of moving to New York, Hanssen allegedly made his first contact with the KGB, offering his services in return for \$100,000.

According to the *Washington Post*, when Hanssen was reassigned to FBI headquarters in Washington in 1987, he borrowed \$125,000 to help finance a \$205,000 house in Vienna, Virginia. According to property records, Hanssen refinanced his home up to \$156,000 in 1992 and refinanced again in 1993 for \$203,150. Last summer the Hanssens reportedly took out a \$110,000 loan and a \$35,550 line of credit. A portion of this borrowed money may have gone to pay for private school and college tuition for the Hanssen children.

But financial inducements alone may not explain why Hanssen entered into a relationship that so starkly contradicted his public persona. Raised a Lutheran, he converted to Catholicism after his marriage and became deeply involved in Opus Dei (Work of God), an international orthodox Catholic organization established in 1928. Opus Dei is a powerful political faction in the Church, and has served as a militant arm of Catholicism in countries where Stalinist “Communist” parties have had significant influence in the working class.

Friends say Hanssen denounced communism as “godless,” and former coworkers said he spoke out against the threat of Marxist infiltrators long after the end of the Cold War. It is impossible to judge Hanssen's sincerity in making these statements, but he did adopt a

conservative political posture, attending anti-abortion demonstrations and opposing gun control.

Did Hanssen make an about-face and junk his religion and political outlook when he began to work for the KGB? Friends and coworkers testify to his zealous devotion, particularly to his religion, up to the end. Quite possibly Hansen's two sides coexisted, held together by a mixture of personal instability, alienation from the FBI, and a more general disaffection with American society.

James Bamford, an author of books about intelligence gathering who befriended Hanssen some eight years ago, said of him, “He had an extremely secret life. It was almost to the point where he had a split personality right down the middle. It's the most complete alter ego I've ever seen.” Hanssen himself wrote to the SVR, the successor to the KGB, in 1999: “I am either insanely brave or quite insane. I'd answer neither. I'd say, insanely loyal. Take your pick. There is insanity in all the answers.”

Coworkers regarded Hanssen as somewhat aloof and quirky, a computer aficionado with a passion for mastering details. He was nicknamed “Dr. Death” because his somber, proper manner of dress mimicked that of a mortician. But there was a darker side to this odd demeanor that emerged in one incident in 1993.

Kimberly Lichtenberg, who worked as a civilian employee of the FBI, says that on February 25, 1993 Hanssen, who was her supervisor at the time, attacked her after she walked out of a meeting where the work habits of a typist were being discussed. Lichtenberg left the discussion because she had no problems with the typist's performance. Hanssen reportedly yelled at her to return, and when she didn't, grabbed her from behind, threw her to the ground and continued to drag her until she was able to free herself. Hanssen was eventually suspended without pay for five days in connection with the assault.

This incident took place at the same time the FBI was conducting a top secret probe into whether there was a mole operating in the bureau. The FBI drew no connection between Hanssen's actions and the fact that he had access to top-security information, and may well have been nervous over the investigation. It would take another eight years for the FBI to assemble the evidence to accuse Hanssen as a counterspy and place him under arrest.



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