

Philip Agee, former agent who exposed CIA crimes, dies in Cuba

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Philip Agee, the former CIA operative who broke with the agency and devoted his life to exposing its role in political subversion, assassination, torture and support for military dictatorships, died January 7 in Cuba. Cuban sources said that he died of peritonitis after ulcer surgery. He was 72.

Agee joined the CIA in 1957, at the age of 22, soon after graduating from the University of Notre Dame. He worked for the agency for 12 years, with three tours of duty in Latin America, in Ecuador, Uruguay and Mexico. He resigned in 1969, after witnessing the US-backed bloodbath against student protesters on the eve of the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City.

After a six-year effort to write an exposé, find a publisher and evade CIA efforts to suppress his revelations, Agee saw his book *Inside the Company: CIA Diary* published by Penguin Books in London. It gave a meticulous account of CIA activities in the three Latin American countries, including the recruitment of officials in each country as CIA informants, the sponsoring of right-wing media and political parties, and close collaboration with local repressive forces, both police and military, in the arrest, torture and murder of leftist students, workers and political activists.

The book was filled with details of CIA tradecraft, including the codenames and descriptions of numerous operations, and concluding with a list of nearly 250 CIA operatives, local agents and informants, whom Agee identified under their real names as well as their pseudonyms.

Inside the Company was a political bombshell, coming amid widespread revelations of CIA assassination plots, involvement in military coups such as the 1973 bloodbath in Chile, and illegal surveillance against the American people, particularly those opposed to the Vietnam War. The book became a bestseller despite efforts by the US government to block its publication and distribution, and

it sparked additional efforts by left-wing political activists to expose CIA operations.

Agee participated in these efforts, co-sponsoring *Covert Action Information Bulletin*, a magazine devoted to blowing the cover on CIA activities, and co-authoring several books that named thousands of CIA agents in Africa and Western Europe. He drew on his knowledge of CIA practices and combed lists of US diplomatic and military personnel stationed abroad to identify those likely to be undercover operatives.

Agee was at pains to declare his political motivation in turning against the agency. He was not a mercenary defecting to the Stalinist side in the Cold War, he maintained, and he publicly refused collaboration with the Soviet KGB and the Cuban DGI. His goal was to help save the lives of those targeted for mass murder by US imperialism, and to contribute to the victory of popular revolutionary movements. He told the *New York Times* in 1974, on the eve of the publication of *Inside the Company*, "I wrote it for revolutionary organizations in the United States, in Latin America and everywhere else. I wrote it as a contribution to the socialist revolution."

Even before publication of *Inside the Company*, Agee faced death threats originating in the US intelligence apparatus. After the book's release, he was a marked man, targeted by the CIA and the US government as a whole. Country after country expelled him or refused admission, under pressure from Washington.

In 1978, the British Labour government of Prime Minister James Callaghan deported him in response to his efforts to expose CIA backing of a right-wing, pro-US political party in Jamaica.

In 1979, the Carter administration revoked his passport, citing national security reasons. In 1982, the Democratic-controlled Congress passed the Intelligence Identities Protection Act, making it illegal to deliberately expose the identities of CIA officers, even if the information was

gathered from publicly available sources.

In 1987, Agee published a memoir, *On the Run*, which gave more details of his break with the agency and the CIA's efforts to retaliate. He had formed a relationship with a leftist Brazilian woman who had been tortured under the military junta that seized power in that country in 1964. Even after leaving the agency, he struggled with the decision to expose its operations.

He wrote: "It was a time in the '70s when the worst imaginable horrors were going on in Latin America. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Guatemala, El Salvador—they were military dictatorships with death squads, all with the backing of the CIA and the US government. That was what motivated me to name all the names and work with journalists who were interested in knowing just who the CIA were in their countries."

In his review of *On the Run*, published in the *New York Times*, Thomas Powers wrote: "Did Mr. Agee's activity hurt the agency? You bet it hurt. The best evidence of how much can be found in his careful account of CIA efforts to convince him he had been neither forgiven nor forgotten—following him on his travels, spreading rumors about his alleged connection with the KGB and DGI, surrounding him with agents, tapping his telephone and even providing him with an elaborately wired typewriter in order to monitor what he was putting down on paper. Most difficult of all was a two-year period in the mid-1970s, when the agency, with high-level help, managed to bar him from residence in Britain, France, Italy and the Netherlands, apparently hoping to hound him until he was forced to take up residence in the Soviet bloc, where his true allegiance (from the agency's point of view) would no longer be in doubt"

Agee survived this campaign, and eventually settled in Hamburg, Germany, where he lived with his second wife, American ballerina Giselle Roberge Agee. He also maintained an apartment in Havana, and operated a small business promoting American travel to Cuba.

He remained a continual target of harassment and smear tactics by the US government. One of the more notorious slanders was that Agee's revelations had led to the assassination of Richard Welch, the CIA station chief in Athens, who was shot to death by a Greek terrorist organization in 1975. Welch was not named in *Inside the Company*, which focused on Latin America, and it is now known that his identity was uncovered by local journalists in Athens.

This did not stop President George H. W. Bush, who was CIA director in 1976-1977, from accusing Agee of

responsibility for Welch's death in a 1989 speech at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia (in the building now named after himself). The slander was repeated by Barbara Bush, the former first lady, in her 1994 autobiography. Agee sued her for libel, forcing a legal settlement in which Mrs. Bush agreed to remove the charge from subsequent editions of her book.

Agee remained committed to exposing the CIA, and at the time of his death was reportedly working on a book about CIA subversive activities in Venezuela. His trajectory was a singular one: he is the only CIA covert operative known to have broken with the agency out of revulsion against its crimes, and possessed of the moral courage to make that break public, thus risking repression or assassination.

Despite his avowal of socialism—which he wrongly identified with the Cuban state—Agee's was the voice of outraged moral conscience rather than politically educated understanding. As he wrote in *Inside the Company*, "When I joined the CIA I believed in the need for its existence.... After 12 years with the agency I finally understood how much suffering it was causing, that millions of people all over the world had been killed or had their lives destroyed by the CIA and the institutions it supports."

Agee wrote of one interrogation session in Uruguay that he overheard from an adjoining room: "The moaning grew in intensity, turning to screams. By then I knew we were listening to someone being tortured.... I'm going to be hearing that voice for a long time."

The crimes exposed by Agee and others have the utmost relevance today, when the role of the CIA in torture, secret prisons and illegal detentions is once more the focus of public attention.



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