

## Nonfiction Book Proposal

History

### *The Interloper: Lee Harvey Oswald Inside the Soviet Perplex, 1959-1962*

by  
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#### **Summary**

On the cusp of the 50th anniversary of JFK's assassination, *The Interloper* offers for the first time a compelling, carefully reported historical account of Lee Harvey Oswald's two-and-a-half years inside the Soviet Union. Avoiding breathless and unfounded theories, *The Interloper* shows that JFK's assassin was not an agent of Moscow, Havana or the mob but rather a tragic man constantly in search of something he could never find – stability, meaning, a connection with other human beings. It was these very ordinary, everyday impulses that led Oswald to communist Russia, and it was these same forces that led him back to the United States. Unlike other Kennedy-related works, which see Oswald as representing a catastrophic departure from his time and a shatterer of the nation's prevailing idealism, *The Interloper* sees him for who he really was: a man who reflected powerful emotional and political currents already coursing through the American consciousness.

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**I. Overview**

Lee Harvey Oswald's assassination of President Kennedy remains one of the most horrifying and inexplicable moments in the life of the nation. When Americans who were alive on November 22, 1963 remember that day, they talk about where they were when they heard the news, what they were doing, who they were with — as if at this moment the country changed metabolically, as if an unbridgeable gulf opened up between the world before and after the president was shot.

While it is known that Oswald lived in the Soviet Union from late 1959 to mid-1962, the conversation surrounding this period of his life tends to muddy, rather than illuminate, its significance. That's because the focus has been on finding a direct link between Oswald's time behind the Iron Curtain and his assassination of the president, the implication being that Oswald went to Russia, was somehow "programmed" to kill the president, and then went home and did just that. There's a more straightforward story that is less dramatic but more logical and speaks volumes about Oswald, the Soviet Union and even the United States: The same underlying impulses and desires that prompted Oswald to seek asylum in the Soviet Union in the first place ultimately led him to murder President Kennedy. This is the central thesis of *The Interloper*.

Oswald went to the U.S.S.R. in search of what he could not find in the United States: a stable job, a place to live, a neighborhood that he could call his own. Above all, he wanted to be connected to other people. In America, Oswald never enjoyed a single meaningful relationship — no family he felt bound to, no real friends, no girlfriends. In the Soviet Union, he hoped he would find that human bond. When he finally moved there, it was these very basic things — places, buildings, people — that captured his imagination. He never appeared terribly interested in Minsk or the Soviet Union as a cultural or political phenomenon. Art, ideology, anything abstract was besides the point. What he cared about were the trappings of everyday life: his one-room apartment, his daily commute, the faces and mannerisms of his coworkers, the meager but adequate income he received at the electronics plant where he worked. He liked knowing where the streets went. He liked the familiarity of things. October Square, the train station,

the sloping, leafy park with the pigeons and ice-cream vendors and the children playing near the riverbank — this was home now. It felt like somewhere normal. He had never known normal, not in New Orleans, New York, Dallas, the Marines — nowhere but the Soviet Union.

He was hardly unique in his search of a new life. Since the birth of the Soviet Union, many Westerners had flocked there believing that it offered greater hope for a connectivity or closeness or “socialist humanism” that they felt was unavailable in the capitalist West, preoccupied as it was with money and materialism. What was unusual about Oswald was his timing. Unlike most of his fellow travelers, who had visited Moscow and Leningrad in the twenties and thirties, Oswald made his great migration East six years after Stalin had died and three years after Nikita Khrushchev delivered his “secret speech,” in which he acknowledged the horrors of the Gulag. Indeed, by the late 1950s, many leftists in Europe and the United States had already given up on the Soviet experiment and trained their sights on what they hoped would be more promising people’s republics or movements in China, Cuba and the so-called nonaligned countries.

But unlike those earlier leftists who had sought utopia in the Soviet Union, Oswald wasn’t looking for someplace specific so much as fleeing somewhere else. His Russian sojourn had less to do with what he wanted and much more to do with what he did not want. What Oswald did not want, more than anything else, was the United States, and there was no place that more forcefully represented the total rejection of the United States than the Soviet Union.

Oswald’s rejection of America, like his embrace of its superpower nemesis, was neither original nor uncommon. In the postwar era, leftist critics, existentialists and the Beats had voiced anger and even despair with the country the United States had become, lamenting the new materialism (cars, houses, suburbs), the new mechanization or conformity of everyday life, and a spiritually draining popular culture that put fun ahead of meaning. America could no longer pretend to be a Jeffersonian republic. It was now, according to these critics, an empire that existed only to perpetuate itself, its corporations and military-industrial complex, and its many client states scattered across the globe.

But Oswald's denunciation of the status quo, his particular brand of anti-Americanism, led to concrete actions that were unimaginably violent and politically destabilizing. This violence is what separates Oswald from the poets and philosophers. Like Ignacy Hryniewiecki's assassination of Alexander II in 1881, which inaugurated a period of radical and bloody upheaval in Russia, Oswald's assassination of John F. Kennedy signaled a terrifying ratcheting up of the rejection of the established order. Can we blame Kennedy's assassination for all subsequent rents in the social fabric? No. But there's no doubt Oswald unleashed something awful and riveting and tragic that made it possible for others to imagine and bring about future violence: race riots, assassination, political treachery, even rising crime rates. Kennedy's assassination was not a sufficient condition for the subsequent chaos, but it was certainly a contributing force, rooted in one man's very personal rejection of America.

*The Interloper* offers, for the first time, a thoughtful and probing inquiry into the two-and-a-half years Lee Harvey Oswald spent in the Soviet Union to better understand his decision to kill the president and the awful repercussions — the chaos — that emanated from that decision. Importantly, this is not a book about two radically different worlds locked in a cold-war embrace. It is about the strange, disquieting, disturbing interconnections between those worlds. By viewing the Kennedy assassination through the lens of Oswald's life inside the "Soviet perplex," with its oddness and incomprehensibility, the book will provide a richer understanding of Oswald, his motivations, and his impact.

As we approach the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the assassination in 2013, there will, of course, be a spate of JFK-related books coming out. *The Interloper* will offer a uniquely compelling window into this distinctly American tragedy, sidestepping unhelpful questions and raising new ones that will reshape the discourse surrounding Nov. 22, 1963. It will accomplish this by viewing Oswald not as a vehicle who was manipulated by external forces — the KGB, the CIA, the mafia, the Cubans — but as an independent actor with a complex and largely unplumbed interior, a man who was not just a wanderer but a trespasser always in search of a home he would never find. More importantly, more enduringly, it will go beyond mere historical actors (Oswald, Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro) and explore the very strange, poignant,

almost surreal context in which this history takes place, a world of Manichean divisions and mythical aspirations. It is worth bearing in mind that neither the Soviet Union nor the idealistic America of John F. Kennedy exists today. The challenge for *The Interloper* will be to make that world real, to connect readers with a place that is simultaneously very far from and very close to our experience today.

## **II. Target Audience**

*The Interloper* will appeal to the large number of general readers with continuing interest in the Kennedy assassination and the cold war. It will also draw academics, journalists, policymakers, political leaders and NGO activists in the former Soviet Union who are hungry for a more compelling and layered discussion of the United States at the height of the cold war, and the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia. These readers understand the important connections between then and now. A book about Oswald's experience in communist Russia is also a book about the American experience in post-communist Russia.

For general interest readers, *The Interloper* offers a more comprehensive discussion of Oswald during the two-and-a-half year period prior to his return to the United States than has ever been available before. For readers with an extensive knowledge of Russia and the Soviet Union, this book weaves together an array of observations and ideas — political, historical, cultural, philosophical — that develop a deeper understanding not only of Oswald but the degree to which he represented (and rejected) the world from which he sprang. Importantly, it is *The Interloper's* emphasis on the world of the interloper that will distinguish it from other forthcoming, Kennedy-related titles, which will inevitably focus on the same tired questions about who did it and when and where and how. (Nowhere in *The Interloper* will the words “grassy knoll” appear.) Along these lines, my goal is to situate Oswald, to transform him from shocking aberration into historical figure. It is this shift in thinking — from viewing Oswald as merely a tragic departure from his place and time to being a function of that place and time — that will stir the greatest debate among readers.

### III. About the Author



I am a frequent contributor to GQ, Harper's Magazine, Time, Condé Nast Traveler, W and other periodicals. I am a former expatriate who lived and worked in Moscow (this is the one and only trait I share with Oswald), and I have traveled extensively in the former Soviet Union. Prior to Moscow, I reported on congressional campaigns for The Hill newspaper in Washington, DC, and on political and religious life for The Daily Progress, in Charlottesville, VA. I have also written for The Atlantic, The New York Review of Books, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal Europe and The L.A. Times Magazine.

Soon to be published work includes a dispatch from the Azerbaijani-Iranian border for The Atlantic; a news story on Azerbaijani-Israeli relations for Time; a review of Robert Service's "Leon Trotsky: A Biography," for Commentary; and a lengthy, magazine-style piece for The National Newspaper, on the plight of U.S. serviceman Christopher Garner, the only American now being held in Russia for homicide. (I am the only foreign reporter, so far as I'm aware, who's interviewed anyone in a maximum-security prison in Russia.)

I graduated from Middlebury College and studied philosophy at the University of Chicago, from which I received my master's. While at Chicago, I focused on German idealism (Kant, Hegel, Marx) and wrote my master's paper on Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms. Some of Cassirer's ideas about cultural evolution and political myth have influenced my thinking about this book. My Russian is workable and has served me well while reporting, although it's not always pretty.

### IV. Competitive Titles

Numerous books have been written about Lee Harvey Oswald. The perspective and quality of these titles vary widely; many are tinged with conspiracy theories that pay little, if any, homage to Occam's razor. Among the most reputable are Edward Jay Epstein's *Legend: The Secret World of Lee*

*Harvey Oswald* (McGraw-Hill, 1978), which is a classic and a must-read. Peter Knight's *The Kennedy Assassination* (University Press of Mississippi, 2000) is informative and thoughtful, if somewhat unimaginative. *Case Closed*, by activist attorney Gerald Posner (Random House, 1993), was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1994 but is riddled with inaccuracies. Vincent Bugliosi's *Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy* (Norton, 2007) is sprawling and overly ambitious. It's telling that some of the best books about Oswald (meaning those books that provide the most believable and psychologically probing portraits of him) are those that are openly speculative, i.e., honestly fictive (as opposed to dishonestly "factual" or conspiratorial), including the brilliant *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*, by Norman Mailer (Random House, 1995), with all its macabre ponderings about man, the state and the cold war, and the entertaining *The People v. Lee Harvey Oswald*, by Walt Brown (Avalon, 1994).

What unites these books is a preoccupation with the question of Oswald's role in the assassination of President Kennedy. All of them have succeeded or failed (commercially or in a literary, investigative or intellectual sense) in so far as they have made a compelling case for or against Oswald's guilt or innocence.

*The Interloper* leaves behind this dichotomy to examine how Oswald's two-and-a-half years in the Soviet Union affected his psychology and his thinking (and ultimately led him to kill the president), and how his expatriate experience in Russia was a transformative, even quasi-religious, process. This book also focuses on a period in Oswald's life that has generally been dealt with in a fairly cartoonish fashion. My concern is not KGB informants, CIA wiretaps and secret meetings in abandoned factories but the less visible yet more powerful psychological and spiritual forces that shaped and preyed upon Oswald as he sought, unsuccessfully, to rebuild himself in the workers' paradise. By moving beyond this cartoonishness and all the cloak and dagger speculation, *The Interloper* moves beyond the story of Oswald the Assassin or Suspected Assassin, to Oswald: a Man of His Time. The book's most important contribution will be reshaping the Oswald-Kennedy conversation from a simple whodunit to a much more valuable political-cultural understanding. When readers are done with *The Interloper*, they should be less

concerned with the conspiratorial particulars of the story and more concerned with what that story tells us about the world in which it happened.

## **V.     Marketing and Promotion**

In collaboration with the publisher's marketing and publicity efforts, I envision a three-point plan to market and promote *The Interloper*:

### *Endorsements and Blurbs*

There are many people — in Soviet/Russian-studies, and the media and policymaking worlds — who would be willing to endorse this book, including friends, colleagues and associates in New York, Washington and Moscow. These include Nina Khrushcheva, the great-granddaughter of Nikita Khrushchev, who is a professor of media studies at The New School and the author, most recently, of *Imagining Nabokov*; Steve Myers, The New York Times' former Moscow bureau chief; Andrew Kramer, The New York Times senior business reporter in Moscow; Alan Cullison, a reporter at The Wall Street Journal's Moscow bureau; Erika Niedowski, The Baltimore Sun's former Moscow bureau chief; Steve Nix, the head of the Eurasian desk at the International Republican Institute; Miriam Elder, a Moscow-based correspondent for The Financial Times, The Times of London, and Business Week.

### *Excerpts and Reviews*

I expect that several of the magazines, web sites and newspapers for which I write (or have written) will be eager to run excerpts and/or reviews of the book, including Harper's Magazine, The Atlantic, Time, Foreign Policy, Slate, The New York Review of Books, The Wilson Quarterly, The Washington Post and The National Newspaper (an English-language paper based in Abu Dhabi that targets business and political elites in the Middle East and Europe). GQ and Conde Nast Traveler, both of which I contribute to on a regular basis, are also keen on promoting books published by their writers.

Finally, my old newspaper, The Hill, which is based in Washington and reaches an inside-the-beltway readership of roughly 40,000, would be pleased to review my boook.

### *Media Appearances and Speaking Engagements*

I am eager to speak publicly about all things Russia, Soviet and post-Soviet, and my reporting puts me in a position to weigh in on the most pressing issues of the day. At the moment, for instance, I am working on stories for an array of publications that deal with everything from oil and gas pipelines in the Caucasus to the Russian soul to the trans-Siberian railway to the changing nature of U.S.-Russian relations. I have done television — during the 2004 election cycle I reported on the presidential primaries in Iowa, South Carolina, Virginia and elsewhere for The Hill and appeared on MSNBC, Fox News and CNN Financial News — and I have been interviewed by NPR and local radio stations many times.

I foresee an ambitious book tour promoting *The Interloper*. The chain stores are an obvious target. Also, there are the hot spots that fall outside the Barnes & Noble/Borders axis: Politics and Prose (Washington), City Lights (San Francisco), The Tattered Cover (Denver), Prairie Lights (Iowa City), and Barbara's Bookstore (Chicago), to name a few. I have friends and acquaintances on faculty at Middlebury, the University of Chicago, Harvard, UCLA, Columbia, NYU, the New School, the University of Illinois (Carbondale) and the University of Massachusetts (Amherst), and I expect they would be very helpful in organizing talks or readings on campus. I have good contacts in the Moscow media world (e.g., *Novaya Gazeta*, whose co-owner, Alexander Lebedev, I recently profiled for Time, and Ekho Moskvyy, the pro-democracy radio station), and they would certainly be interested in hosting an American author who had recently penned a book on Lee Harvey Oswald. Finally, the think-tank world should not be overlooked. I have friends and contacts at Cato, the Brookings Institution, the American Enterprise Institute and the Hoover Institution (which places particular importance on U.S.-Russian relations), and I plan on enlisting all of them in my effort to coordinate talks, readings and panel discussions.

If need be, I will also call on my sister, Sabrina Schaeffer, to help promote my book. Sabrina and her husband, Adam, are the managing partners of Evolving Strategies, a Washington-based media-strategy firm with extensive contacts in the capital and in the television and radio world. To augment the publisher's efforts, Sabrina can facilitate media interviews, schedule talks in Washington and New York, and more.

## **VI. Detailed Table of Contents**

The book will be divided into twelve chapters, including an Introduction and Afterthought, that trace Oswald's arrival in the Soviet Union and his eventual return to the United States — his crossing into the Soviet Union from Finland in the fall of 1959, his arrival at the U.S. embassy in Moscow and subsequent effort to acquire Soviet citizenship, his move to Minsk, his job as a metal lathe operator, his relationship with Marina Prusakova, and their emigration from Soviet Russia in June 1962. Woven into this tale is a related discussion of Oswald's intellectual development: Which ideas captivated him? How did he integrate these ideas into his thinking about the United States, democracy, socialism, revolution and the role of God and man in contemporary society? What were his major misunderstandings? And how did his ideas, his worldview, evolve during the time he was in the Soviet Union? Each chapter should run between 6,000 and 8,000 words, incorporating extensive reportage and some observation and analysis.

I will continue reporting this book as I report any of the magazine articles I write. In this respect, I'm greatly helped by Stanislaw Shushkevich, the former Belarusian Communist Party chief who tutored Oswald in Russian while he was living in Minsk. I met Shushkevich on my first of many trips to Belarus, in the spring of 2004, while I was reporting a story on the democratic opposition there. (Shushkevich, who co-signed with Boris Yeltsin and Ukrainian party boss Leonid Kravchuk the declaration formally dissolving the Soviet Union in December 1991, is now a leading opposition figure, and he's a great character. He has promised to introduce me to many others in Belarus with knowledge of Oswald.) Other potential sources include Marina Prusakova; the two daughters she had with Oswald; Marina's extended

family, in St. Petersburg and elsewhere in Russia; Pavel Golovachev, a co-worker and Oswald's closest friend in Minsk; Rimma Semenova Shirakova, the Intourist guide assigned to Oswald when he arrived in Moscow; Rosa Agafonova, another Intourist guide with whom Oswald may or may not have had a relationship; Carlos Bringuier, the anti-Castro activist and lawyer who debated Oswald, in 1963, on the Bill Stuckey Radio Show; and members of the Russian diaspora in Dallas who befriended Oswald and Marina after they returned to the United States, when Oswald was attempting to write his memoirs, *The Collective*. Relatives and associates of many people who are now deceased may prove helpful: Oswald's friend Yuri Merezhinsky, Oswald's former lover Ella German, the Afghan diplomat Abdel Julali (with whom Marina probably had a brief sexual encounter), Oswald's KGB monitor Yuri Nosenko (himself a renowned defector), former CIA Director Richard Helms and former CIA counterintelligence chief James Jesus Angleton, among others. President George H. W. Bush, who ran the CIA from 1976-1977, is one of the few living former senior CIA officials with direct knowledge of many of the key figures surrounding the Kennedy assassination and Oswald's role in it; whether he would agree to an interview is unclear. Other sources will inevitably emerge as I plow deeper into the reporting. Oswald's self-dubbed Historic Diary should be useful. The Warren Commission suggested the KGB may have tampered with or even concocted the diary to create a "cover story" for Oswald, but this seems unlikely.

While many sources remain to be interviewed for this book, I know and in many cases have already extensively interviewed many of the people in Oswald's circle of friends in Minsk (starting with Stanislaw Shushkevich), as well as writers, physicists, mathematicians and sundry dissidents who were active in the early and mid-1960s in Moscow, Novosibirsk and Leningrad or who were closely connected to those circles through family and professional contacts. These include the writer Vladimir Voinovich; Yulia Khrushcheva, the premier's granddaughter (and the mother of Nina Khrushcheva, mentioned above); Rustam Ibragimbekov, the Azeri-Russian filmmaker; Gia Areshidze, the Georgian physicist who was a fixture of underground circles at Moscow State University; Grigory Yavlinsky, the current leader of the pro-democracy party Yabloko and a former dissident; Lena Kameneva, a former literature professor at

Moscow State University whose father was a leading dissident in the 1960s; and numerous members of the CPSU, or Communist Party of the Soviet Union, *nomenklatura* in the Soviet Socialist republics of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia and Georgia. All these people will provide critical background and key contacts. Also, I have spent a great deal of time in all three cities where most of the reporting for this book will take place — Minsk, Moscow and Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) — and in Arkhangelsk, where Marina Prusakova was born. Indeed, Chapters 3 and 5 are largely reported and outlined. Sections of Chapters 7 and 8, and the Introduction and Afterthought, have also been reported or outlined.

*Introduction: At Wintertime*

The book opens in early 1961 at Oswald's one-room apartment in Minsk, several weeks before he met Marina at a dance. This was his low point in the Soviet Union: He had made a home for himself in Minsk. He led a comfortable, if simple, life. He had a routine. But he was closed in, circumscribed, and he was beginning to feel oppressed — by the cold, the gloom, the ever-present KGB, the grinding course of everyday life in a provincial city in the Soviet Union. What's more, he was growing dispirited with what he had seen of the socialist experiment and contemplating a return to the United States. But he felt trapped — after renouncing his U.S. citizenship and being denied Soviet citizenship, Oswald was declared a "stateless person" — and he knew it might be impossible to go home again. He understood that he might spend the rest of his life in this very bizarre netherzone. This chapter will capture a certain place, a sentiment, a flavor, and the strange bitterness that had consumed Oswald and would congeal into a permanent rage that would remain with him until the day he died, Nov. 24, 1963.

*Chapter 1: In the Very Beginning: On the Quest for a New Metaphysics*

Chapter 1 opens with brief, impressionistic passages from key moments in Oswald's life prior to the Soviet Union: The New Orleans foster home he spent thirteen months in; the New York City

apartment where he lived with his half-brother, John Pic, and Pic's wife before being kicked out; the Atsugi Naval Air Field, in Japan, where Oswald served with the Marines. The chapter then jumps to his arrival in Le Havre in October 1959, then London, and then Helsinki, where he obtained a Soviet visa before crossing into the U.S.S.R. on October 16, 1959, two days before his twentieth birthday. The goal here is twofold: To illustrate the peripatetic, disjointed life Oswald led before arriving in the Soviet Union and the excitement that Oswald, like other Westerners who "defected in reverse," felt in the immediate lead up to his "defection" — his quest for a new metaphysics. (This may sound overblown. It's not. The Westerners who moved to the Soviet Union believed they would find a new way of life there that would feature not only different political, economic and social arrangements, but a new way thinking, a new way of conceiving of life, the state, the community and human relations.) The chapter ends in Helsinki on an anticipatory note, pregnant with possibility, uncertainty and hope. It features fresh reporting on Oswald's travels and includes some material from the Warren Commission report and Oswald's journal.

### *Chapter 2: Ideational Underpinnings*

This chapter traces Oswald's intellectual development. Just as Chapter 1 followed the physical path Oswald took to get to Helsinki, Chapter 2 follows the development of his ideas, his politics and ideology, from disaffected, rudderless teenager to angry young man drawn to a socialist-totalitarian state he barely understood. Oswald was a ninth-grade drop out and he probably had dyslexia and a slew of psychiatric ailments, but he read voluminously, especially on Marxism, socialism, revolution and political economy. As he moved around the country and then onto the Soviet Union his ideas didn't evolve so much as harden. One of the central goals of this chapter will be to illustrate this strange, troubling migration from "learning" to "ossifying," and how this ossification, prior to his arrival in the Soviet Union, colored his entire Soviet experience: Did Oswald know where he was going? Was the Soviet Union, from Oswald's perspective, simply the anti-America? Or did it represent a coherent set of values and aspirations? Did he have a coherent worldview? Information for this chapter will come primarily

from interviews with Shushkevich, Bringuier, Marina and members of the Russian diaspora in Dallas and their descendants. Marina, who remarried a few years after the Kennedy assassination and is known as Marina Porter, has spoken with other journalists and appeared in several documentaries about the Kennedy assassination. I am confident I can secure an interview with her. She lives outside Dallas.

### *Chapter 3: The Sculpture Garden: The Allure of the Unknown and the Unknowable*

Chapter 3 explores the allure of the Soviet idea, with all its contradictory, Russian, scientific, nihilistic formulations and incongruities. What was it about communism that appealed to Oswald? What was it, specifically, about Sovietism that was so compelling? On one hand, this chapter situates Oswald in the context of the Western adventurer-*penseur* who flocked to Russia during and after the 1917 revolution (e.g., John Reed, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Lovett Fort-Whiteman, among other “useful idiots”). On the other hand, it delves into the particular aspects of Bolshevik thought that grabbed Oswald. (My working hypothesis is that Oswald was drawn to the violence of revolution, the same bloodlust that Turgenev’s Bazarov and other “angry young men” were consumed by.) The chapter title, a reference to a sculpture garden in Moscow with busts of Lenin and Stalin, is meant to reinforce the idea of ossification introduced in Chapter 2. I will draw on interviews with historians and political theorists (e.g., Richard Pipes and Stephen Kotkin, both of whom I have interviewed, and Robert Service, whom I have not interviewed), and radical, Marxist-Leninist sources (e.g., Chernyshevsky’s “What Is To Be Done?”, and Leo Trotsky’s and Adolph Ioffe’s writings on revolution).

### *Chapter 4: Moscow, 1959: A Meditation on Soviet Geometry and the Idiocies and Oddities of a Non-Violent Totalitarianism*

Chapter 4 brings the reader back to the Moscow that Oswald encountered in late 1959. This was perhaps the most fascinating moment in the nation’s history, although the drama and significance of the moment were hardly visible. Having recently passed the half-way mark of its 74-year lifespan, the Soviet

Union had arrived at a critical, seemingly contradictory moment, or what I'd simply call the Soviet Contradiction. Just as it was ascending to the apex of its power — putting the first man into space, assembling a global empire — the country was unleashing the forces that would one day destroy it. Khrushchev embodied this contradiction, boldly proclaiming that communism would be “complete” by 1980 while presiding over the “thaw” that destabilized the whole Imperium. This was the contradiction that Oswald found himself in — a contradiction that the “ossified” American probably did not take to and could not grasp. This disconnect, between the place Oswald expected and the place he encountered, is critical to understanding his later decision to return to the United States. Also critical to understanding Oswald's state of mind during this period is his alleged suicide attempt, which took place at the Hotel Berlin on October 21, 1959, just days after he arrived in the Soviet Union. I will be looking for anyone with ties to the medical and psychiatric examinations Oswald underwent at Botkin Hospital, in Moscow. The circumstances surrounding the suicide attempt are murky, and it's not even clear that Oswald did, in fact, try to kill himself. What is clear is that Oswald, his application for Soviet citizenship having been (temporarily) rejected, was distraught. I expect to report important new material here. The Soviet newspapers (*Izvestia*, *Pravda*) and interviews with dissidents and the writer Vladimir Voinovich (whom I have interviewed for Conde Nast Traveler) will provide additional material for this chapter.

### *Chapter 5: Refractions of America*

Central to Oswald's Soviet experience was the Soviet Union's view of the United States. Chapter 5 turns Chapter 4 inside out, focusing on Soviet attitudes toward America, Americans and, by extension, Oswald. What was the “America” Oswald encountered in the U.S.S.R.? What did the Soviets make of “democracy”? “Freedom”? Popular culture? Black people? The American woman? American sexuality? No doubt, the “America” of late 1950s and early 1960s Russia was a complex place, a series of overlapping snapshots, imaginings, cartoons, caricatures and state-orchestrated mythologies. Sources in this chapter will include newspapers, journals (including *Novy Mir*, famous for having published *One Day*

*in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in 1961), the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library archives, Khrushchev's published speeches, and the Russian State Library archives, in Moscow. Critically, this chapter links the Soviet Contradiction, noted above, with a counterpart American Contradiction — Kennedy's White House years, when America seemed to achieve (and lose) everything, when a profound idealism met with a powerful cynicism and darkness. Granted, these two junctures in the life of the Soviet Union and the United States do not perfectly coincide. (It was not until Nov. 22, 1963, that America would be plunged into its own "contradiction.") But the connection between the two — Oswald — is too important not to explore. This discussion of contradictory junctures, or Soviet versus American Contradictions, stems from my own ideas, which have been shaped by my readings of Hegel, Marx, Cassirer, and the American historians Richard J. Hofstadter and Christopher Lasch.

#### *Chapter 6: Minsk to the End of the Line*

In the early 1960s, Minsk appeared the perfect, socialist-totalitarian construct: neat, compact, brimming with metal works, electronics factories and tractor plants. Oswald wasn't sure how to feel about it. Initially, he seemed happy. (In his diary, on January 7, 1960, the day he left Moscow by train for Minsk, he noted, "I wrote my brother & mother letters in which I said I do not wish to every [sic] contact you again. 'I am beginning a new life and I don't want any part of the old.'") Once he arrived in the city, he quickly saw it for what it was: Orderly, staid, rigid. Minsk was the capital of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Belarus, and it was just three hours by car from the Soviets' westernmost border, and there were military and KGB officers everywhere. It was comfortable, in its own way, but deadly serious, oppressive, surreal. What did this surreality look like? What did it mean to be inside the Soviet perplex? And what about the city's darker subculture — the alcoholism, prostitution and organized crime that lurked behind the whole Potemkin Village? (Marina, who worked at a pharmacy, had been part of this subculture since her early teens, and she offered Oswald access to it.) I plan to interview as many of the people (or their descendants) in the Oswald orbit as I can find for this chapter. I also expect to return to

Minsk for several months, which should provide much more color and depth. The chapter title is a play on the novella by Soviet writer Viktor Yerofeev.

### *Chapter 7: The Proletarian*

Once inside the Soviet perplex, Oswald embarked on a process of “proletarianization.” He had not sought this course. He had wanted to attend Moscow State University and indulge his many theories about American imperialism. But the KGB, in charge of deciding where foreigners lived and worked and whom they interacted with on a regular basis, had other plans for him, and in Minsk he was assigned to an electronics outfit, where he served as a metal lathe operator. Instead of joining the intelligentsia, he joined the proletariat. It was this process that Oswald seems to have most resisted. Why? His resistance seems at odds with the delight he derived from the simple things: his apartment, his neighborhood, the park, the ice-cream vendors. One would imagine him fitting rather nicely into the mold of the Soviet working man. This chapter, covering the period from mid-1960 to mid-1961, looks at why that was not the case and explores one of the defining, internal tug-of-wars with which Oswald had to contend. Yes, he wanted to belong. But belonging demanded its own kind of commitment or determination, and Oswald had never displayed that. His life was a series of displacements characterized by a lack of commitment, a permanent roaming, a sense of never belonging or being able to belong. In the Soviet Union, Oswald imagined himself acquiring a new metaphysics, becoming a new man, a Homo Sovieticus, but he didn’t quite know how to do that. He didn’t know how to get there. This chapter will combine interviews with the Minsk circle — notably Marina, Shushkevich and Golovachev — new reporting from Minsk and some well worn material from the Warren Commission, Oswald’s journal and the Belarusian Interior Ministry archives. (Belarus is a closed society, and the Interior Ministry is generally off limits to the public, but material involving Oswald has been made available in recent years.)

*Chapter 8: The Great Souring*

Resistance to proletarianization gave way to loneliness, isolation, pain — antagonism. Chapter 8 explores Oswald's ultimate rejection of the Soviet experience. His experience — dull, mechanistic, drained of the idealism and expectation that Oswald had been filled with in Helsinki — ran totally counter to the idea of the Soviet Union that had propelled Oswald in the months and years prior to his arrival there. This will not come as a shock to readers — Oswald, as noted, didn't have a rich knowledge of or interest in the Soviet Union so much as a deep aversion to America — but it came as a shock to Oswald. Instead of the "new life" he'd imagined, Oswald found sameness, order, suffocation. This sense of being suffocated began to develop in early 1961, grew over the course of the year, and by early 1962 achieved a piercing and relentless climax. (Oswald and Marina spent much of 1961 pleading with U.S. authorities to let them immigrate to America.) This chapter blends interviews with Oswald's circle and KGB informants (especially Intourist guide Rosa Agafonova, who first alerted the authorities to Oswald's disenchantment with Minsk), with material from the Warren Commission and Mailer's *Oswald's Tale*, which asserts (incorrectly) that Oswald was more knowledgeable and intelligent than previously believed.

*Chapter 9: Leningrad*

Behind all the ups and downs — the naive curiosities, the adolescent rage, the flight from America, the flight to paradise — was an ever-present dislocation, a fear, a rumbling, a chaos in the back of Oswald's head. There was no one who could sympathize and coexist with his pain the way Marina could. Just nineteen when she married Oswald, she was the most fascinating character in the Oswald orbit. Much has been written and said about her, but the most critical aspect of her biography has gone undiscussed: the fact that she spent her childhood in Leningrad, one of the most devastated cities on the planet following World War II. Born in July 1941 near Arkhangelsk, on the White Sea, Marina arrived in a Leningrad that was very gradually rebuilding itself, a place that had been enveloped by death, cannibalism, rape and murder during the nearly three-year Nazi siege and that was still shell-shocked.

This chapter opens with Marina's Leningrad years; then it jumps to where we left off at the end of Chapter 8, a month before she gave birth to the couple's daughter; then it moves to a brief, impressionistic passage on her life in Dallas, after the assassination and ends a month before the assassination, in October 1963, when the couple tried and failed to obtain visas to return to Soviet Union. (Marina specified, in her application, that they wanted to live in Leningrad.) Interviews with Marina, her family and friends and their descendants in Minsk and Moscow, and the Russian diaspora in Dallas will make up Chapter 9, as well as reporting from St. Petersburg and Arkhangelsk.

#### *Chapter 10: Thirty Months Later: The Defector Defects*

This chapter covers the spring and early summer of 1962. By the time Oswald left the Soviet Union with Marina and their newborn daughter, in June of that year, who was he? What did he believe in? Did he believe in anything? The Soviet-Russian expatriate experience is deeply psychological. It is exploratory. It is about a commitment to an idea — about *sobornost* (connectivity) or History or human suffering. But Oswald's idea, or ideas, had always been very poorly developed. He was like many expatriates: a blank canvas, or, better yet, a canvas riddled with confusions. His understanding of this place, this new metaphysics, was flawed, destructive, totally at odds with the absurdist tragicomedy that was Russia for most of the twentieth century. By the time Marina obtained her exit visa from the Soviet authorities and the couple had been granted the right to immigrate to the United States, the idealism and hope that had led Oswald to Helsinki all the way from Louisiana, however fanciful or unmoored it may have been, had been replaced by an overriding, inextricable darkness. This chapter will rely on extensive interviews with Oswald's circle in Minsk and the U.S. officials, in Moscow and Washington, who were involved in the Oswalds' visa-application process. This is a particularly critical part of Oswald's life that has gone almost entirely undiscussed. I expect to report significant new material here.

*Afterthought*

It would be wrong to say that this darkness, born of thirty months inside the Soviet perplex, prompted Oswald to kill John F. Kennedy. What's much more plausible is that the same forces that first led him to this darkness ultimately set him toward a tragic downward finale. Oswald, far from being changed by the Soviet Union, was simply confronted with himself: He had come to the Soviet Union desperately searching for something he could not find in the United States, and he returned to the United States searching for something he could not find in the Soviet Union. Whether Oswald achieved any insight into himself is doubtful. He spent the last, post-Soviet stretch of his life in a frenetic whirl, casting about, lurching mindlessly for stable ground until, finally, he stopped lurching and surrendered to the emptiness from which he'd come. Americans may prefer to see Oswald as having been "infected" by his Soviet experience, but that's a misreading of what actually happened. Oswald was an American whose fears and alienation reflected something profoundly deep and disturbing about postwar America. It was only in the Soviet Union that the inescapability of his torment was revealed.

**VII. Sample Writing**

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