

CIA Agents In Chinese Captivity

For years the CIA kept the details under wraps. Two high-ranking CIA agents flew to China on a daring mission, thinking they were coming to the aid of CIA operatives—when, in reality, it was an ambush. Both were caught and taken into captivity. Over the ensuing two decades they underwent intense physical and psychological torture. Read about the longest-held American prisoners of war.

Aryeh Cohen

Recently, US intelligence agencies uncovered a nest of Russian spies operating freely in America.

The Justice Department accused Evgeny Buryakov, also known as “Zhenya,” of posing as a Russian banker in Manhattan to funnel economic intelligence to the SVR, Russia’s foreign intelligence agency. Two other Russians, Igor Sporyshev and Victor Podobnyy, ostensibly diplomats in Russia’s UN mission in New York, were accused of being Buryakov’s SVR handlers. While Buryakov was operating deep undercover, and therefore had no diplomatic protection, the other two had immunity and have already left the United States.

At the moment, analysts are busily debating the nature and extent of this group’s activities. As of this writing, not much is known about them and precisely what they were up to. Some speculate that the reports they sent to their superiors were not especially important for Russia or damaging to

the US. Others argue that they were much more damaging than we can imagine, and there are even claims that America is deluged with hundreds of such spies, though little is known about their alleged identities.

At times like these, when a fresh security crisis hits the United States, previous espionage incidents come to mind, both successful and failed. Here is the unbelievable and (for many years) unknown story of a CIA mission gone terribly awry.

Communist Containment

America was riding high in June 1951, and so was John T. Downey, a 21-year-old English major and football star, as he stood in the courtyard of Yale’s old campus one Monday morning beside his beaming mother.

Downey had graduated from one of America’s most prestigious institutions. The Korean War had just turned one year old and US forces were pushing back a communist offensive. Armistice talks would begin as a result. The United States might soon be bringing its boys home.

However, such hopes proved premature.

At the time, America was resolutely waging war against communism around the world. It spent inordinate amounts of time, money and effort pursuing the policy of “containment,” meaning the containment of communism’s spread. Through proxy armies and governments, communists and capitalists, East and West, waged military and ideological war against each other. This war even spread to America’s backyard, in Latin America for instance, where the CIA overthrew governments with communist leanings. The conflict’s main focus, however, was in Asia. And that’s exactly what the Korean War (and later, the Vietnam War) was about.

Under its totalitarian leader, the maniacal Mao Zedong, the communists had come to power in China in 1949. Almost immediately, the US began work on a number of fronts to overthrow his regime and replace it with a democracy. The CIA tried to develop a fifth column (the “Third Force”) within China



Supply trains on their way to communist North Korea are bombed by American airplanes.



US General Douglas MacArthur observes from a Navy ship as American forces bombard communist targets in Korea.



Fighting in Seoul, capital of South Korea, during the war.



Chinese Communist troops captured in South Korea during the war.

by recruiting Chinese to work against their government.

The hope was that America could enlist insiders with the same level of success the Allies had previously had undermining Nazi control of Europe in WWII. Underground groups in many of the occupied lands had engaged in an ongoing campaign of spying, sabotage and guerrilla warfare. These diverse underground movements significantly weakened the Nazis and made the efforts of the Allied armies, when they arrived, that much more winnable.

There was, however, one significant difference. In Europe, most people hated the Nazis. In post-war China, the general populace was not necessarily so adverse to the new communist system. (Communism always sounds nice at the beginning, before the population begins to suffer from its inherent vices, such as totalitarianism and grinding poverty.) They also had little trust in foreign governments, their agencies and agents.

In short, the plan to enlist a fifth column in communist China was strategically flawed from the outset. Still, the CIA was determined to forge ahead with a plan no matter how unrealistic.

The Spy

John Downey was the very model of the credentialed, idealistic young man the agency wanted in its ranks. The son of a judge and the grandson of a Connecticut state legislator, he won scholarships to the exclusive Choate School and to Yale. Downey excelled in his studies and was on his way to law school and a successful civilian career until the Korean War intervened.

“One day a CIA official visited Yale,” Downey related many years later. “He told us we might be parachuting behind enemy lines to help set up a resistance network. Hey, that was as glamorous as anything we could hope for. A large number of the outstanding people in my class applied.”



A courtroom sketch of Evgeny Buryakov, recently arrested in New York as a Russian spy.



Young CIA agents Richard Fecteau (left) and John T. Downey.

