

# in-met in MOSCOW

## Death of an Ambassador



*In 1964, a former Canadian ambassador to Moscow died while being interrogated by the RCMP. John Watkins was a suspected Soviet spy, but the mystery of his death has never been explained. In the first of two articles, author John Sawatsky, whose book Men In The Shadows was the first inside look at the RCMP security service, tells what happened.*

The Citizen

FOCUS 4

general news/travel/classified 1

Ottawa, Saturday, June 13, 1981, Page 49

## Official Ottawa doted on his reports, but the KGB found out John Watkins' weakness — and tried to recruit him

By John Sawatsky

Even today people who knew John Watkins talk about his dispatches from the Soviet Union.

Few observers could dissect the Soviet character as well as Canada's ambassador to Moscow in the mid-1950s. Watkins' reports were so beautiful they read almost like poetry and Ottawa's mandarins had rarely before been treated to such a feel for any country — and read the reports for the sheer joy of it. Even the hardnosed Mounties who would later scrutinize the dispatches for evidence that Watkins was a KGB agent were impressed.

Although Watkins' reports were frequent, long, detailed and amazingly complete, there was one piece of information he purposely withheld — that the KGB was trying to recruit him as an agent.

The KGB knew Watkins was a homosexual long before it was able to exploit this secret aspect of his life.

The Canadian mission in Moscow in those days consisted of a mere handful and the embassy's chauffeurs, cooks, cleaning staff and some messengers were mostly Soviet citizens routinely under KGB control and they quickly realized which personnel were vulnerable to pressure.

It soon became apparent who was fighting with his spouse, who was sexually hungry, who desired more money and who was

although he did observe and admire beautiful women in the same way he enjoyed a work of art.

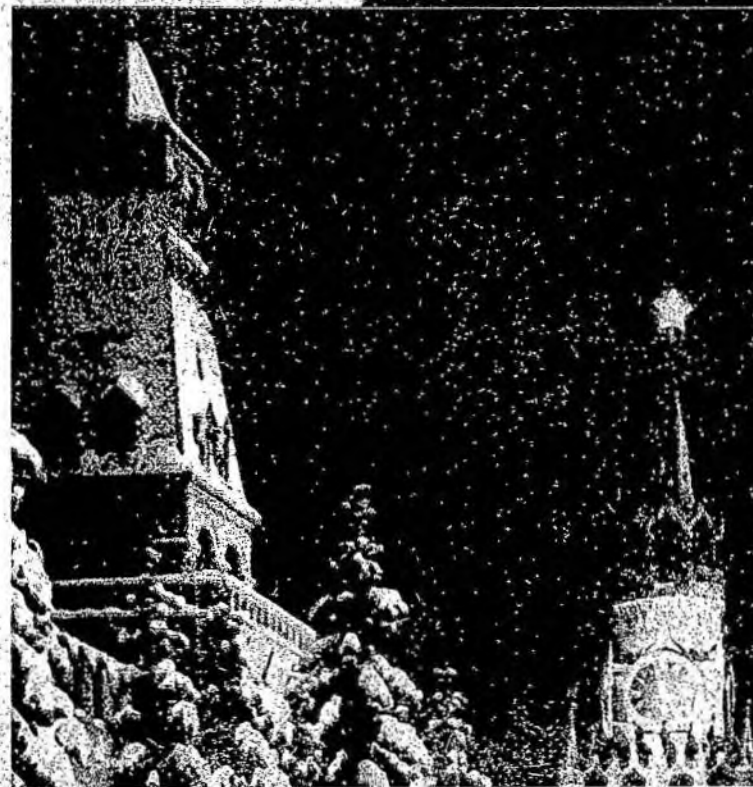
Watkins was quiet, somewhat shy, sensitive, humane and weak. He fitted almost perfectly the homosexual of the day. He did not have a regular lover even in Canada and sometimes cruised Ottawa's homosexual haunts and occasionally made a wrong encounter and received a physical beating, a most humiliating experience for such a pleasant and erudite man.

In Moscow, he knew he couldn't cruise because, as every Westerner posted there is warned, the KGB keeps a watchful eye.

During a walk through a park Watkins once encountered an opportunity and was tempted but resisted. He figured it was KGB provocation and he was probably correct. For some time the KGB was unable to induce him into a homosexual liaison.

It had been many years since a Canadian ambassador had travelled through the south of the Soviet Union and, in fact, few diplomats from the Western world had been there in recent years. When a chance arose, Watkins decided to go and make the most of it with a tour lasting several weeks.

The trip through the southern republics proved worthwhile for External Affairs. Watkins' interest extended beyond the formal accomplishments of Soviet officialdom and he met people not connected with the



*John Watkins knew he couldn't cruise in Moscow—the KGB was watching his every move*

Minister Lester Pearson visited the Soviet Union and attended a dinner party at Nikita Khrushchev's dacha in the Crimea.

Much drinking was going on and Khrushchev proposed many toasts, including one to women, at which point he said not everybody present loved women. Pearson later wrote in his memoirs: "As the evening went on the atmosphere became mellow and mellow. John Watkins, however, looked less and less happy."

Over the next months Gribanov and Gorsky and their associates poured on the treatment in an attempt to make Watkins feel comfortable in the Soviet milieu.

They hoped that holding the secret of his homosexuality over him in combination with positive experiences from A0785379\_1-000533 would propel him into the role as agent of influence.

Shortly before Watkins...



otherwise dissatisfied.

Once the KGB had a target it was expert at concocting schemes luring these individuals into a trap and then blackmailing them. The most vulnerable people in the 1950s were the homosexuals because then almost all homosexuals were in the closet and that mere fact made them vulnerable. In those days, External Affairs automatically fired any employee discovered to be homosexual.

A few years later, one of the embassy's cipher clerks, entrapped in a planted homosexual relationship and then confronted with photographic evidence, did come forward and disclose what had happened.

He was promptly recalled to Canada, interrogated and summarily dismissed. Despite his courageous decision, the department did not transfer him to a non-sensitive position and did nothing to help him find work outside the government.

## Watkins was quiet, shy, sensitive, humane and weak

The cipher clerk for his own selfish interests would have been better off succumbing to the KGB as did one of his colleagues, a security guard named Roy Guindon, a single, young heterosexual without a girlfriend in Moscow.

The KGB dangled before him a striking seductress named Larissa Dubanova and Guindon fell in love and carried on a hectic but secret affair.

Lara became "pregnant" and talked Guindon into a secret and phony wedding before suffering a "miscarriage". With money from the KGB, Guindon was able to support his "wife".

Guindon became Russia's most prolific known agent inside the Canadian embassy in Moscow. As night security guard he was also part-time cipher clerk and had access to the one-time cipher pads as well as the combination to virtually every safe on the premises.

Guindon was transferred to Warsaw and continued operating there. The KGB sent Lara to Poland on visits to ensure his enthusiasm was maintained although by this time he was irretrievably caught in the espionage net. Guindon was then posted to Tel Aviv where the efficient Israeli service quickly intercepted his activity and reported it to the RCMP.

Showing little sign of remorse, Guindon confessed under interrogation but suffered a fate no worse than the homosexual cipher clerk who had been honest. The Department of Justice felt it couldn't get a conviction and Guindon was allowed to resign.

Later, chauffeur Frank Sales was blackmailed in Moscow and continued to co-operate at his next posting in Peking. He was discovered only after he was transferred to West Germany. He too was not prosecuted.

Watkins was a lifelong bachelor and wasn't known to have affairs with women

Communist party and produced some of his best dispatches ever.

## Went to hotel room with friendly poet

One of Watkins' most intriguing acquaintances came in Turkestan in the Uzbek Republic where he met a lyric poet who spoke freely and frankly. The two got on well together. They visited a vineyard and drank much and went to a restaurant for a hearty meal.

Watkins concluded the poet was too independent in disposition to be a KGB plant, and, besides, he was thousands of miles from vigilant Moscow. So Watkins and the poet later went to his hotel room.

Watkins was right that the poet was not a plant but wrong in thinking he could hide it from the KGB. They were noticed having dinner in joyous fashion and the hotel staff reported the fact they went to his room together.

Later in the tour, Watkins met a young man named Kamahl whom he found boyish and quite likable. Kamahl was hardly into his 20s and worked in a clerical capacity on a collective farm in the Soviet agriculture bureaucracy. Watkins and Kamahl dined at the hotel and later went to Watkins' room.

With an opportunity now in hand, the KGB started events moving to entrap the ambassador. The KGB decided against using the Uzbek poet because he was too independent and chose young Kamahl who would be more reliable.

After his tour, Watkins found access to official Moscow much easier. In fact, people from the foreign ministry seemed to be seeking him out.

Two officials who were particularly outgoing and accommodating were Oleg Gorbunov and Anatoli Gromov, both of whom showed a personal interest in him.

In fact, Gromov was actually Anatoli Gorsky, an old-time KGB officer who, while using the cover of Professor Nikitin of the Institute of History, helped run the infamous agents Kim Philby, Donald Maclean, and Guy Burgess in London in the 1940s.

Gorbunov, the more senior man, was Oleg Gribanov who at the time was being elevated from assistant head to head of the KGB's Second Chief Directorate, the largest directorate.

## Special treatment at Moscow parties

The fact the KGB was employing one of its 10 highest-ranking officers in an operational function revealed the importance the organization attached to the Watkins' recruitment.

Gribanov looked the archetypal Soviet officer, short, stocky, balding, shabbily dressed, but possessing a mind both steely and imaginative.

Gribanov and Gorsky and other lesser officials invited Watkins to parties and gave him special treatment.

Watkins received a letter from Kamahl saying he was planning to visit Moscow for a holiday and would appreciate it if he would show him the city as he had never been to Moscow previously. By the time Kamahl left Moscow, the KGB had all the



evidence it needed from hidden cameras in Kamahl's hotel room.

Attempting to recruit Watkins was a delicate operation. Old-fashioned blackmail as practised routinely against lower-echelon personnel was inappropriate in such a case because the potential consequences of failure were too great.

Watkins might report the matter and the Canadian government would be incensed and Canadian-Soviet relations damaged. Even worse, Watkins might commit suicide and leave a note and completely disrupt relations.

## Everything was genteel but Watkins knew he was at the mercy of the Soviets

A suicide at this level would attract worldwide attention and stand as an international symbol of KGB treachery. Yet the rewards of such a high-level recruitment were too tantalizing for the KGB not to try.

The Soviets knew Watkins would be returning to Canada soon and was saving him as an agent of influence, somebody who from the inside would seek to push Canadian policy away from the United States and toward a more pro-Russian position.

This prospect became particularly rewarding, when it was revealed that Watkins' new post back in Ottawa would be as Assistant Undersecretary.

At the same time the KGB was mounting an operation against Watkins, it was also conspiring against the ambassador from France, Maurice Dejean, who had an indiscreet appetite for women.

The KGB was interested in Dejean because he was considered to be a confidante of Charles de Gaulle, who, it appeared, would be returning to power. The KGB

hoped Dejean would get a cabinet post from which to exert a pro-Soviet influence.

The KGB served Dejean with beautiful women and Madame Dejean was befriended by a handsome drama and film writer named Yuri Krotkov whose role was to seduce the ambassador's wife.

Madame Dejean never succumbed but her husband had affairs with at least two KGB women, and, during one encounter, the "husband" burst onto the scene and created a scene and vowed to report the ambassador as the bewildered Dejean fled the premises.

Gribanov and Gorsky, using the same aliases employed against Watkins, had also been cultivating Dejean and at this critical moment Gribanov interceded.

As a personal favor, he promised to use his influence to have the husband pulled off and the entire matter hushed up. Dejean was now in Gribanov's debt and blackmailable and, as it turned out, did not become a cabinet minister anyway.

Although the operation against Watkins was simpler, it had to be handled with the same delicacy.

Gribanov invited Watkins into his office and gave the appearance of being troubled. A file sat on his desk and Gribanov motioned to it and said a matter had come to his attention from the KGB. He never opened the file, he didn't need to for Watkins knew immediately what it was all about.

Gribanov, the KGB officer, said that as a diplomat he was shocked the KGB stooped to such tactics and didn't approve of them but added that this matter caused him problems because the KGB wanted to exploit the situation. He assured Watkins he was doing what he could to keep the KGB off and believed he would be successful.

Everything was genteel but Watkins realized what was really going on and knew his career rested at the mercy of the Soviets. At any time, they could disclose his homosexuality, and finish him with External Affairs. If he did anything to anger the Soviets, he could be gone.

The threat of exposure reached brinksmanship proportions when External Affairs

Shortly before Watkins was transferred to his new post in Ottawa, Gribanov had one last meeting in which he counselled Watkins that Dimitri Chuvakhin, the Soviet ambassador to Canada, had a difficult role to fulfill and would need his help.

"If there's anything you can do to help us, be friendly to Chuvakhin," he said.

"Be friendly to Chuvakhin," was the code phrase warning Watkins they expected him to co-operate.

## Quiet retirement swiftly threatened

Watkins retired in 1962 and moved to Paris and lived quietly on the Left Bank. He visited the Canadian embassy frequently and enjoyed the company of his good friend, Jules Leger, the Canadian ambassador.

His quiet retirement was destined to be broken shortly because, as Watkins was retiring, a KGB major Anatoli Golitsin, was defecting to the CIA from his post in Helsinki.

Prior to his time in Finland, Golitsin worked in Moscow under Gribanov in the KGB's Second Chief Directorate and was knowledgeable about numerous attempts to entrap foreign personnel, including an incident about a homosexual sex trap laid against the Canadian ambassador.

Golitsin knew the ambassador had been entrapped but didn't know enough to be able to say the KGB had followed it up with a recruitment attempt. He couldn't identify the ambassador but an investigation, codenamed Operation Rock Bottom, quickly singled out Watkins.

(There was initial doubt about which ambassador Golitsin was referring to because by this time Watkins' successor in Moscow, David Johnson, had also been identified as a homosexual. Unlike Watkins, Johnson had never been indiscreet and limited his homosexual activities to one of his top officials.)

(Johnson would have likely carried on unexposed except he was the ambassador who sent back to Ottawa the homosexual cipher clerk who reported the KGB blackmail attempt against him. The forthright cipher clerk, in his interrogation back in Ottawa, identified Johnson, and both the ambassador and his lover were called back and asked to resign.)

## RCMP picked time to interrogate Watkins

Later, Yuri Krotkov, the handsome KGB agent who failed to lure Madame Dejean into an affair, defected with additional information about Rock Bottom. Krotkov was not involved in the case but knew that Gribanov had attempted to recruit Watkins although he couldn't say whether he was successful or even what approach had been used.

The Krotkov information advanced the Rock Bottom investigation a crucial step and the RCMP now felt it had sufficient information to interrogate Watkins.

Now more than ever the RCMP wanted to know exactly what happened when the KGB approached Watkins.

(Monday: interrogation and death)

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