Hugh'sNews

New discoveries about Hemingway ... along with some new questions

by Hugh Turley

Ernest Hemingway had secret contact with Soviet intelligence agents, according to a recent book, Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America, by John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Alexander Vassiliev.

The book is based largely upon newly released KGB records, but it draws upon his FBI file to show, as well, that during World War II Hemingway used his fishing boat the Pilar to hunt for German submarines for the U.S. government. He had a weakness for political intrigue, and he leaned heavily to the left.

Although there is no known record of Hemingway ever having passed along any secrets, one KGB correspondence notes that "... he repeatedly expressed his desire and willingness to help us." The KGB gave him the code name, "Argo."

Hemingway's KGB contacts possibly cast a new light on the violent death of the famous author. FBI records show Hemingway was under surveillance, and shortly before his death he checked into the Mayo Clinic using the alias George Sevier.

In a letter to his son Patrick, Hemingway wrote that he was being treated for high blood pressure. Mayo's Dr. Howard Rome kept the Minneapolis FBI office informed on Hemingway's condition. (Rome is the doctor who later performed a psychological autopsy of Lee Harvey Oswald for the Warren Commission).

On July 1, 1961, the night before he died, Hemingway dined at the Christiania Restaurant in

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Ketchum, Idaho. In her book, How It Was, his wife Mary wrote, "As we wedged into the small far-corner table, Ernest noticed a couple of men seating themselves at a small table farther inside and asked Suzie, our waitress ... who those men were. 'Oh, they're a couple of salesmen from Twin Falls, I think,' said Suzie. 'Not on Saturday night,' said Ernest, 'They'd be home.' Suzie shrugged. 'They're the FBI,' Ernest muttered."

The first official report of Hemingway's death was a joint statement by the coroner Ray McGoldrick and the sheriff Don Hewitt, "Ernest Hemingway died this morning at about 7:30 at his home near Ketchum from gunshot wounds. His wife thinks it was accidental while he was cleaning his gun."

The UPI reported, "Officials did not see any gun-cleaning equipment in the room."

The following day the UPI said McGoldrick was asked if "self-inflicted gunshot wound in the head" on Hemingway's death certificate meant he killed himself or died accidentally. McGoldrick responded, "I wasn't there so I don't know. Maybe the truth will never be known. No one saw it. The family is willing to let it go that way and that's all right with me. The wife thinks it was an accident."

The authorities did not interview Mrs. Hemingway until the day after they had reached their ambiguous conclusion. Her statement had been given through a friend. There was no coroner's inquest and no autopsy.

Hemingway was shot in the 5-by-seven foot front entrance hall of his home. Hemingway's custom-made, .12 gauge, double barreled, Boss shotgun was near his body. Both barrels had been fired, and Mrs. Hemingway said she was awakened by a couple of banging sounds.

Boss shotguns are highly prized and can sell for tens of thousands of dollars. One known to have been made for Hemingway would have doubtless fetched a large premium. However, according to Carlos Baker in Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story, a family friend "cut the gun to pieces with a blowtorch and buried them in a secret place."

When Hemingway, himself, was buried on July 5, The New York Times reported "there was still no official decision — and never may be — as to whether the death ... had been an accident or suicide."

Suicide eventually became the popular truth while the reality of FBI surveillance and his meeting with KGB agents remained unknown to the public. Was Hemingway paranoid and suicidal, or were those covert operatives with sinister plans at the restaurant that night?