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Spying Suspects Seemed Short on Secrets

By SCOTT SHANE and BENJAMIN WEISER

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WASHINGTON — The suspected Russian spy ring rolled up by the F.B.I. this week had everything it needed for world-class espionage: excellent training, cutting-edge gadgetry, deep knowledge of American culture and meticulously constructed cover stories.

The only things missing in more than a decade of operation were actual secrets to send home to Moscow.

The assignments, described in secret instructions intercepted by the F.B.I., were to collect routine political gossip and policy talk that might have been more efficiently gathered by surfing the Web. And none of the 11 people accused in the case face charges of espionage, because in all those years they were never caught sending classified information back to Moscow, American officials said.

“What in the world do they think they were going to get out of this, in this day and age?” said Richard F. Stolz, a former head of C.I.A. spy operations and onetime Moscow station chief. “The effort is out of proportion to the alleged benefits. I just don’t understand what they expected.”

As cold war veterans puzzled over the rationale for [Russia](#)'s extraordinary effort to place agents in American society, both Russian and American officials signaled that the arrests would not affect the warming of relations between the countries.

At a meeting with former President [Bill Clinton](#) on Tuesday, [Vladimir V. Putin](#), the prime minister and a former spy himself, said, "Your police have gotten carried away, putting people in jail." But he played down the episode: "I really expect that the positive achievements that have been made in our intergovernmental relations lately will not be damaged by the latest events."

The White House press secretary, [Robert Gibbs](#), struck a similar note. "I do not believe that this will affect the reset of our relationship with Russia," he said. "We have made great progress in the past year and a half working on issues of mutual concern." Asked if the White House found it offensive for its partner to be spying on the United States, he said the case was "important," but a law enforcement matter.

Meanwhile on Tuesday, the police in Cyprus arrested the man known as Christopher R. Metsos, the last of the spying suspects to be detained, and American officials disclosed that they had moved to make arrests over the weekend because one of the people suspected of being Russian agents, who called himself Richard Murphy, was planning to fly out of the United States on Sunday night, possibly for good.

After years of painstaking surveillance, the F.B.I. did not want any of its targets to escape, and "you can't take down one without taking down all of them," one law enforcement official said.

The F.B.I. on Sunday arrested 10 people in Yonkers, Manhattan, New Jersey, Boston and Virginia and charged them with conspiracy to act as an unregistered agent of a foreign government. Most were also charged with conspiracy to commit money laundering.

American officials said they believed that most of the accused spies had been born in Russia and had been given sophisticated training before resettling in the United States, posing as married couples. They connected with various Americans of influence or knowledge, including a "prominent New York-based financier" described as a political fund-raiser with personal ties to a cabinet official, a former high-ranking national security official, and a nuclear weapons expert.

But they were instructed not to seek government jobs, because spy bosses in Moscow thought their cover stories would not stand up under a serious background investigation. So they were assigned to feed to Moscow what amounted to briefing papers on economics issues, American government players and diplomatic and military affairs.

One, the agent known as Cynthia Murphy, talked to New York contacts and reported on “prospects for the global gold market” that her bosses (whose spelling in English-language messages was imperfect) told her were “v. usefull” and passed to the Russian Ministry of Finance.

Before a visit to Moscow by [President Obama](#) last year, Ms. Murphy and her ostensible husband, Mr. Murphy, were instructed to size up American intentions from their home in Montclair, N.J. “Try to outline their views and most important Obama’s goals which he expects to achieve during summit in July and how does his team plan to do it (arguments, provisions, means of persuasion to ‘lure’ [Russia] into cooperation in US interests),” the spy bosses in Moscow asked, according to the charging papers.

Another time, Moscow offered vague instructions that might have been directed to journalists: “Try to single out tidbits unknown publicly but revealed in private by sources close to State department, Government, major think tanks.”

But why would Russian intelligence ask for such information from people settled in New Jersey rather than, say, Russian Embassy experts or specialists in Moscow or Washington?

“It’s a Hail Mary pass,” said Milton A. Bearden, who served for three decades in the C.I.A.’s clandestine service and ran its Soviet and East European division as the Soviet Union fell.

“Maybe I end up next to a guy that is the minority staff director on some committee and we do barbecues, or I coach his kid in Little League,” Mr. Bearden said. “How can you lose?”

For the Russian government, he said, supporting the so-called illegals operation was probably relatively inexpensive, particularly because some suspected agents were self-supporting, as court papers show.

One, Ms. Murphy, reported an annual income of \$135,000 as a financial planner, her affidavit says. And another, Anna Chapman, owned her own real estate firm in Manhattan, which her lawyer said in court was valued by his client at \$2 million.

If anything, the challenge for Moscow in an operation of such duration was to make sure its agents remained loyal amid the comforts of daily suburban American life. After the collapse of Communism, Mr. Bearden said, several Czech “sleeper agents” in the United States refused to go home, saying they felt they had become Americans.

“What’s their life like, and particularly if it goes on for years?” said Burton Gerber, a former chief of the C.I.A.’s Soviet division, of the suspected Russian agents. For couples with children, for example, they may be “very guilty spies,” Mr. Gerber said, and yet influenced by P.T.A. and after-school sports.

“At some stage, do you begin to think of yourself more as American than Russian?” he said. “Without feeling a sense of betraying Russia, they may just want to lead quiet lives.”