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A Spy Drama With the Big Stars

The intelligence community has been in an uproar for months over a spy story that involves former secretary of state Henry A. Kissinger, Soviet Ambassador Anatoly F. Dobrynin and the CIA's best undercover agent in Moscow during the past decade.

It also involves some top-secret microfilm that mysteriously disappeared from CIA vaults and an apparent attempt by the White House to keep a lid on the scandal.

The tale begins in Moscow in the early 1970s. The agency's man was a Russian named Anatoly Filatov, who had been recruited while serving as a Soviet diplomat abroad. Code-named "Trigon," the CIA spy had been transferred to the Soviet foreign ministry in Moscow, and he soon began passing along fantastic information to his American handlers.

But about 1975, the quality of Trigon's dispatches turned into very thin gruel. The CIA suspected that Trigon had been unmasked by the KGB, and was being used to send false information. But the agency maintained its contact with him.

Then, in the spring of 1977, Trigon passed along an intelligence blockbuster. It purported to be a microfilm copy of a cable Dobrynin had sent to the Politburo describing his breakfast meeting with Kissinger on April 11, 1977.

Intelligence sources who have read the translation of the six-page cable paraphrased its contents for

my associate Dale Van Atta. What Dobrynin reported to the Kremlin—or supposedly reported—was embarrassing in the extreme to the former secretary of state.

The two friendly antagonists, Dobrynin and Kissinger, had acquired a mutual respect during the protracted negotiations over the SALT I arms limitation pact.

They discussed SALT II and, specifically, the first ambitious proposals President Carter had put forth just a month before. Instead of merely limiting the growth of nuclear weapons, the new president's proposal called for a reduction. The Soviets turned it down quickly and emphatically.

Kissinger had been out of office for less than three months. If the Dobrynin cable was accurate, Kissinger clearly had little respect for the new men in the White House, and even less compunction about undercutting them to the Soviet ambassador.

The cable reportedly quoted Kissinger as saying approximately this:

"Jimmy Carter is a prisoner of his own illusions on human rights. Zbigniew Brzezinski is an ideological dogmatist. The two are crazy. Only I know what is acceptable to the Soviets. I was not consulted about the March proposals. I would have been against them."

In short, the former secretary of state was paraphrased as telling the Soviets that the new administration's proposals were nonsense and should not be taken seriously.

The cable was immediately suspect at the CIA, which thought it might be a fake. Electronics experts at the National Security Agency were asked to check the cable traffic from the Soviet Embassy in Washington during that period. They did, and pronounced the cable authentic, sources said.

Kissinger quite naturally denies the statements attributed to him by Dobrynin in the cable. It would be grossly improper for a private American citizen, especially one of his stature, to sabotage an administration's policy by popping off in such fashion to a foreign official.

It is, of course, possible that the Soviet cable deliberately distorted what Kissinger said, for reasons as murky as the half-world of espionage itself. The whole thing might have been an elaborate set-up designed to reestablish Trigon as a supposedly reliable CIA source.

The cable copy had a curious subsequent history. It had come from Trigon on microfilm, and at least one paper copy was made. Then, incredibly, the microfilm disappeared, apparently a CIA first. According to high-level sources, a White House directive forbade anyone who had not already seen the cable to look at the copy.

As for Trigon, he was officially compromised and arrested. Two sources have said he committed suicide, but Soviet press accounts say he was tried and executed.