

KGB spy: how I ran CIA's supermole

by Mark Franchetti
Moscow

FOUR years after Aldrich Ames was exposed as the most devastating mole ever to have been deployed by the former Soviet Union in the Central Intelligence Agency, his KGB controller has spoken about his recruitment and downfall.

Viktor Cherkashin, a highly decorated former KGB spy, was in charge of counter-intelligence at the Soviet embassy in Washington on the day Ames walked in offering to betray his country. He was the first KGB officer to meet, assess and instruct Ames, who earned \$2m (£1.2m) from his spying.

The KGB response to his information alarmed Cherkashin. It rounded up and executed as many as 10 double agents named by Ames. The operation alerted the CIA to the presence of a mole within its ranks and provoked the hunt that led to Ames's identification and arrest nine years later.

For this, Cherkashin blames Vladimir Kryuchkov, then chief of the KGB's first directorate which handled foreign intelligence. He said Kryuchkov acted with reckless haste, motivated by a desire to impress his Kremlin masters.

Kryuchkov subsequently became chairman of the KGB, but was ousted in disgrace after taking part in the 1991 coup attempt to overthrow Mikhail Gorbachev, the former Soviet leader.

"One of the first rules in the world of counter-intelligence is to protect an agent," said Cherkashin. "Kryuchkov did not care about Ames or about me. He only cared about himself."

"Executing those double agents was a big mistake. From then onwards it was obvious that the Americans had a mole inside the CIA. We basically told them — all because Kryuchkov felt insecure about his post and wanted to go up the ladder."

Cherkashin's handling of Ames was the high point of his 30-year career as a supremely skilled exponent of KGB intrigue; he was rewarded with the Order of Lenin, the second highest award in the former Soviet Union. For the Americans, the case remains the most humiliating in the history of the CIA.

Last week Cherkashin, 66, who left the KGB in 1991 and now runs his own security company, gave his first formal interview with a western newspaper. He spoke to The Sunday Times in the elegant office on Pushkin Square in central Moscow from where he coordinates the supply of intelligence and bodyguards to businessmen.

He recalled his caution on April 16, 1985, when Ames first presented himself at the Soviet embassy, a few blocks from the White House. A veteran of countless covert operations, Cherkashin, who joined Soviet counter-intelligence at the age of 24, had spent several years in Moscow working to



Spycatcher: KGB centre in Moscow and Cherkashin, who netted Ames, the CIA traitor

infiltrate the British embassy opposite the Kremlin on the banks of the Moscow River. He had completed tours of duty in Australia, Lebanon and India. Few KGB officers were better placed to welcome Ames and ensure that he kept the secrets flowing.

Ames's first act of betrayal was to hand in a sealed letter at the Soviet embassy in Washington. It was addressed to Stanislav Androsov, Cherkashin's boss and now one of his closest friends. The contents of the letter have never been confirmed officially, but it is thought to have revealed the

overreact and treated the case with some suspicion at first," recalled Cherkashin. "The Americans had been very successful in the past at feeding us genuine information as a bait. There was always the risk of getting hooked and later discovering that the whole thing had been a hoax to distract us. They had even passed us real documents to provoke us," he said.

Cherkashin sent a telegram to Moscow to inform Kryuchkov and began to run checks on Ames who, he says, used the pseudonym Rick Wells. He was then summoned by Kryuchkov

brilliant officer and he had handled some serious cases. He wasn't the drunken fool the Americans had tried to portray. This was a big fish."

Ames, who was responsible for recruiting Russians as double agents and therefore had the perfect cover to stroll in and out of the embassy, now met Cherkashin for the first time. "We had a special reception room which was 100% bug-free," said Cherkashin. "High-tech equipment had been installed to ensure that there could be no eavesdropping."

Later that day a Russian diplomat briefed by Cherkashin made the KGB's first payment to Ames. The money, sent from Moscow in diplomatic pouches, was hidden in a brown paper bag and handed over during lunch.

"There were \$100 bills wrapped tightly inside," Ames told Pete Earley, an American author, after his arrest. "Every one of them was a \$100 bill. It was \$50,000. I was totally exhilarated. I had pulled it off."

On the same day Gordievski was summoned back to Moscow from London. Accused by the KGB of spying for Britain, he was rescued in broad daylight from the streets of the capital in a daring British intelligence operation that deeply embarrassed the Kremlin.

During the next nine years Ames became the world's most



\$2m spy: Ames and wife Rosario during their trial. She had bought 500 pairs of shoes

highly paid spy, leading a lifestyle far more lavish than could have been afforded on his \$70,000 annual salary. He bought a house with \$500,000 in cash, a Jaguar car, expensive clothes, antiques and paintings.

He spied for the Kremlin under Gorbachev and then under Boris Yeltsin, the Russian president, who was briefed regularly on the case. As head of the CIA's Soviet operations counter-intelligence branch in

Washington, Ames was privy to many of the agency's most sensitive secrets. He betrayed more than 20 moles, mostly Russian double agents.

Almost half are believed to have been executed and most of the others were jailed. More than 100 CIA operations — and many British ones — are thought to have been compromised as a result of Ames's betrayals.

"The killing was wrong,"

said Cherkashin. "Ames is often branded a murderer but he did not kill anyone. He is not to blame. The Soviet Union, its death penalty and its laws are to blame."

Rosario Ames, his wife, had owned 500 pairs of shoes at the time of the couple's arrest. She was sentenced to five years in jail after she admitted having given Ames "advice and support" during the last two years of his espionage activities.

Ames is serving life without parole in solitary confinement in the United States.

Cherkashin, who returned to Moscow in 1987 to help the Russians detect and hunt down American agents working in Russia, was the KGB handler who cultivated Ames in the early stages of his double life.

"That is always the most dangerous and sensitive time — the first few months," he said. "That is when the details of conspiring need to be worked out without attracting attention. That is when one agrees to ways of passing on information: the dead drops, the meetings. That's when you get to know each other."

The mastermind behind some of the most effective measures that the KGB had implemented to protect Ames from being detected by the CIA, Cherkashin surprised him on one occasion by attending a lunch he had arranged in a Washington restaurant with the Russian diplomat they used as a channel to exchange money and information.

Ames became nervous. The FBI knew Cherkashin and had him watched. Ames feared his cover would be blown. "We knew the CIA often made its officers undergo routine lie detector tests. That was always a problem," explained Cherkashin. "Ames would be asked if he had recently had unofficial contacts with KGB officers: that was a standard question."

"The trick was to create a situation, a surprise meeting. There was no need to lie after that. He could safely say that he had been approached while trying to recruit a Soviet diplomat. The lie detector would not register anything strange."

Ames passed at least two such tests before being caught in February 1994. He admitted after his arrest that he had been alarmed by the KGB's sudden execution of the double agents he had exposed.

Cherkashin believed that those named should have been used as "triple agents" to feed misinformation to the Americans, but was unable to persuade Moscow to adopt this strategy. Had he succeeded, Ames might never have been caught.

Cherkashin now believes Ames may have been betrayed by another mole whose name has never been disclosed.

"I felt sorry for Ames the day he was arrested," he said. "Someone betrayed him but Kryuchkov planted the first seed. How can I not feel sorrow for a man who helped our country like he did and who is now in jail?"