

Ex-Spymaster Convicted of Betraying Anna Chapman

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A senior intelligence official was sentenced in absentia Monday to 25 years in prison for betraying Anna Chapman and the nine other sleeper agents in the United States who flew to Moscow in a spy swap last summer.

The Moscow District Military Court said Colonel Alexander Poteyev, who oversaw the sleeper agents as deputy head of the "S" department of the Foreign Intelligence Service, fled Russia shortly before the United States announced the spy bust last June and ditched a business meeting at intelligence headquarters in his haste to leave the country.

"Mary, try to take it calmly. I'm leaving not for some time, but forever," Poteyev wrote his wife in a text message mentioned in the court verdict. "I didn't want to, but I had to. I am starting a new life, and I will try to help the children."

Poteyev, using another person's passport, traveled to Belarus and then Germany before

arriving in the United States, according to the verdict, which was carried by Interfax and Itar-Tass.

The court convicted Poteyev, 59, of high treason and desertion in a closed-door trial and stripped him of both his military rank and an award for his service in the Afghan War. Poteyev served in the elite KGB task force Zenit that took part in a successful Soviet-backed coup to kill Afghan strongman Hafizullah Amin in 1979.

Poteyev's court-appointed lawyer, Andrei Kucherov, said he would appeal, RIA-Novosti reported.

He also said Poteyev's wife does not believe her husband is guilty and wanted to join him in the United States.

The court said a request to U.S. authorities for information about Poteyev's whereabouts has gone unanswered.

Poteyev, who graduated from the prestigious KGB school in Minsk in the mid-1970s, is the son of Nikolai Poteyev, a tank commander decorated with the Hero of the Soviet Union award for his bravery during World War II.

Chapman has testified that a U.S. undercover agent approached her using a code known only by Poteyev and her personal handler in Moscow, the verdict said.

Other intelligence officials testified that only Poteyev had access to the information that allowed the betrayal of the 10 agents, it said.

Chapman and the other nine agents pleaded guilty for conspiring to serve as unlawful agents of a foreign government and were exchanged in July for four Russians jailed on espionage charges in Russia.

The spy swap, conducted at the Vienna airport, was the biggest since the Cold War, and the agents received state awards on their arrival in Moscow. But several former U.S. intelligence officials have downplayed the significance of the information that the Russians might have collected.

"You can't ignore that public recognition may be accorded for propaganda reasons having nothing to do with the actual merits of the case or the success of the spy," Peter Earnest, a former CIA officer, said in e-mailed comments in January.

Andrei Soldatov, a security expert with Agentura.ru, speculated that the Russian agents might have been involved in a commercial operation on behalf of Russian companies.

He pointed to a 2007 speech by then-President Vladimir Putin that the security services should more actively defend the interests of Russian companies abroad. "This means the defense of Russian interests is the defense of Gazprom's interests," Soldatov said by telephone.

Poteyev's wife, who was initially reported to be in the United States, was called to court to testify in connection with the trial, court spokeswoman Lyudmila Klimenko told Interfax

last month.

Curiously, Poteyev and his family got some unwelcome attention in 2003 when their apartment in northwestern Moscow was robbed, Novaya Gazeta reported, citing a robbery report filed by Poteyev's wife. The robbers, who identified themselves as police officers and carried pistols, stole more than \$3,000 and 30,000 rubles and tied up Poteyev and his son Vladimir. It was unclear whether the robbers were found.

The whereabouts of Poteyev's son is unclear.

Poteyev also has a daughter who lives in the United States.

A former Russian intelligence officer who worked in North America during Soviet times expressed surprise Monday that the Poteyev family was not watched more closely.

"If a person works for such a service, he and his family should have traveling restrictions. It looks like either he had no restrictions or no attention was paid to them," said the former officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity to avoid jeopardizing his relationship with the intelligence community.

A former intelligence officer who knew Poteyev's family told Novaya Gazeta in November that Poteyev's wife and daughter worked as consultants for Russian officials who needed to place their money abroad. "It is possible that U.S. tax authorities got interested in the mother and daughter and then made an offer to Poteyev that he couldn't refuse," the unidentified former officer said.

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