Episode Book

EPISODE #5509

The Long Tail of Spy Stations

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SYNOPSIS

The CIA's public map archive lists 110 country maps. A 1961 memo from White House aide Arthur Schlesinger Jr. to President Kennedy counted 16 CIA case officers among 20 people in the Vienna embassy's political section. Both are true — and together they describe an intelligence footprint far longer and stranger than the London-Moscow-Washington picture most of us carry. This episode traces how espionage got from early modern ambassadors running "more-or-less official agents" and France's cabinet noir mail-opening operations, through Siena's 1252 spy supervisors and Venice's Bocca di Leone denunciation boxes, to the 1909 birth of Britain's Secret Service Bureau and the modern professional station system. Along the way: why Mossad's Tel Aviv headquarters breaks the embassy-cover model, what "Controlled American Sources" was a euphemism for, and why the intelligence map is always a floor and never a ceiling.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Daniel's been on a bit of a tear through Jerusalem's real estate lately, and this one pulls together two threads we've been pulling on for a while.



Herman

The churches buying up pieces of the city, and the diplomacy-espionage overlap.



Corn

Right. So here's what he wrote. He loved the episodes about world churches acquiring pieces of Jerusalem, sometimes cutting deals with the government to hold onto access. And he loved the one on pre-service espionage, where states spied on each other through diplomacy and through underhand mechanisms, postal censorship being the big one. His point is that the modern dedicated spy service is a relatively new invention. Over time, capable states built professional services and decoupled military intelligence into independent bodies. And then we all picture the same three or four cities. London, Moscow, Washington. But those are a few cities among hundreds of significance.



Herman

And his question is the long tail.



Corn

His question is the long tail. To what extent do countries actually run espionage in lesser-known cities, including ones like Jerusalem and Tel Aviv that matter enormously but aren't the hubs of global doings. How do we even learn about operations, given governments don't disclose them. Leaks, later disclosures, the CIA turning out to have run a formal station inside a specific embassy or consulate. And then the big one, the one he actually wants answered: is there a long tail, and would we be surprised at its length?



Herman

Yes. And more than he thinks.



Corn

That's the episode then. So before we get to the long tail, let's hold two pictures in our heads at once. The CIA's own public map archive, and a memo a White House aide sent to JFK in 1961.



Herman

Start with why we can even have this conversation. Espionage is by definition undisclosed. Nobody publishes a station list. So the map we're about to draw is reconstructed from leaks, from memoirs, from defectors, from declassified records, and occasionally from a government deliberately blowing someone's cover as a message.



Corn

Which means the map is always a floor, never a ceiling. Everything we know is a minimum.



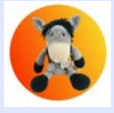
Herman

Exactly that. And the two pictures prove it. Picture one: the CIA's own map archive, publicly posted, lists a hundred and ten country maps. Afghanistan to Benin. That's the agency itself implying a near-universal geographic footprint.



Corn

Picture two.



Herman

June 1961. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who was a White House aide at the time, writes to Kennedy complaining that the CIA had nearly as many people under official cover in its embassies as were actual State Department diplomats. This is not a hostile journalist. This is the President's own staff, alarmed.



Corn

So one picture says everywhere, the other says stretched thin and leaning on the State Department to hide its people.



Herman

Both can be true. A service can be everywhere and still be stretched. But the tension is the whole story, and it's what the long tail actually looks like from the inside.



Corn

And we should flag one thread before we go back in time. Mossad's headquarters is in Tel Aviv, not Jerusalem. And its model of overseas presence is structurally different from the CIA's embassy-cover model. Keep that in your pocket, because it's the contrast that makes the embassy map make sense.



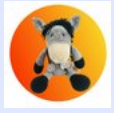
Herman

To understand why the station map looks the way it does, we have to go back before there was such a thing as a spy service. When the ambassador was the spy.



Corn

How literally is that true?



Herman

Literally enough that their contemporaries said it out loud. Ambassadors in the early modern period were suspected of being little more than honorable spies. That's the phrase. They transmitted encrypted information through their secretaries, they paid for intelligence, and they ran what the historians call more-or-less official agents. More-or-less official meaning: poisonings, censorship, kidnappings, assassinations.



Herman

It's the diplomatic version of a shrug. And the workhorse of the whole system wasn't the agent at all. It was the mail.



Corn

The cabinet noir.



Herman

France and England pioneered it. The systematic opening, copying, and deciphering of foreign correspondence before forwarding it on to the recipient. You intercept the letter, you read it, you copy it, and then you send it along as if nothing happened. The recipient never knows.



Corn

So the letter arrives. It's been read. It's been copied. And the copy is already in Paris or London before the original is even in the recipient's hands.



Herman

Cardinal Mazarin, chief minister of France from 1642 to 1661, is the one who really built this. He combined the best practices of other states and funded it at the highest political level. This wasn't a clerk in a back room. This was state policy, paid for by the chief minister.



Corn

Britain ran the same play against France. Relied heavily on intercepted mail and dispatches. And the beauty of it is how few people you need. A handful of agents inside the postal system could intercept likely correspondence, have it copied, and forward it to the intended receiver and to London.



Corn

A few people inside the post office, and you've got a foreign ministry's inbox.



Herman

And it scales. Russia's Okhrana used what they called perlustration. Same thing, interception and reading of private correspondence. And they ran an antenna in Paris under Pyotr Rachkovsky to monitor revolutionaries. An antenna, in their vocabulary, was a permanent foreign presence. That's the ancestor of the station.



Corn

So the embassy isn't the only early cover. The mail is the early cover.



Herman

The mail is the early cover, and the diplomatic bag is its descendant. Which we'll come back to.



Corn

Now here's the part that should surprise people. Daniel's premise is that professional spy services are new. And they are. But the bureaucracy of spying is not.



Herman

Siena had five Ufficiale sopra le spie. Spy supervisors. Attested as early as 1252.



Corn

Twelve fifty-two.



Herman

Venice institutionalized domestic denunciation through the Bocca di Leone. The lion's mouth letterboxes at the Doge's Palace. You drop an accusation in, and the state reads it.



Corn

So the long tail of intelligence bureaucracy is older than the professional services by centuries. The paperwork predates the profession.



Herman

It really does. What's new in the nineteenth century isn't spying. It's the decoupling. The moment states decide that military intelligence should be its own permanent body, separate from the army that uses it.



Corn

Give me the dates.



Herman

Austria's Evidenzbureau, 1850. First permanent military intelligence service. It gets used in the 1859 Austro-Sardinian war and then in the 1866 campaign against Prussia.



Corn

How did that go for them?



Herman

The 1866 campaign is not a story about Austrian intelligence succeeding. But the institution survives the defeat, which is the point. France creates the Deuxième Bureau on the eighth of June, 1871. Germany's Abteilung three-b follows in 1889. Italy's Ufficio Informazioni goes permanent in 1900.



Corn

And Britain.



Herman

Britain's Secret Service Bureau, 1909. And this is the one to remember, because it's described as the first independent and interdepartmental agency fully in control of all British government espionage activities. A joint initiative of the Admiralty, the War Office, and the Foreign Office. Three departments, one bureau.



Corn

Three departments agreeing on anything.



Herman

In 1909, no less. And then in 1910 it splits into a naval section and an army section. Those become MI5 and MI6.



Corn

So the modern civilian service is born in 1909, and within a year it's already two services.



Herman

That's the pattern. You professionalize, and then you specialize. And there's one more piece, which is the Great Game.



Corn

Britain and Russia, Central Asia.



Herman

That's where a modern intelligence apparatus with permanent bureaucracies for internal and foreign infiltration and espionage was first developed. Including a pioneering cryptographic unit established in India as early as 1844.



Corn

Eighteen forty-four. That's before the Evidenzbureau by six years.



Herman

The empire on the frontier needed to read its mail before the metropole decided it needed a bureau. That's the long tail again. The capability shows up at the edge first.



Corn

So by 1909 you have professional, decoupled services. And the moment you have those, you need permanent physical presence abroad. That's the station map. Let's look at it.



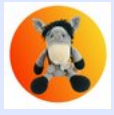
Herman

The reason London, Moscow, and Washington dominate the imagination is partly that they're capitals, and partly something more specific. The station chief role carries real institutional weight.



Corn

Define real.



Herman

In a country of strategic importance. Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, Riyadh, Berlin, London. The chief operates with a level of access to the host country's intelligence and policy environment that few other American officials hold.



Corn

So the station chief isn't a mid-level officer with a desk. He's a peer of the ambassador in some rooms.



Herman

Often with an office in the American embassy. And formally, he's the senior US intelligence representative to that foreign government. The equivalent on the other side was the KGB Resident.



Corn

And that's why those three cities feel mythic. The job there is bigger than the job elsewhere.



Herman

Which is true, and which is also where the misconception starts. Because the famous hubs are where the action is, so everywhere else must be marginal.



Corn

And the Schlesinger memo is the counterargument.



Herman

The Schlesinger memo is the counterargument, and it's brutal in its specificity. In the political section of the US embassy in Vienna, sixteen of the twenty people listed were CIA case officers.



Corn

Sixteen of twenty.



Herman

Eleven of thirteen political-section officers in Chile were CIA. The agency had a hundred and twenty-eight people in the embassy in Paris.



Corn

Paris. Which isn't a hardship post.



Herman

And here's the aggregate. The State Department had about three thousand nine hundred officials stationed abroad. The CIA had three thousand seven hundred. Almost half of US political officers in embassies were CIA. About fifteen hundred were under State Department cover. The other twenty-two hundred were under military or other cover.



Corn

So the State Department's own political reporting staff was, roughly, half intelligence officers.



Herman

And Schlesinger traced this back to the agency's creation in 1947. The use of diplomatic cover was meant to be temporary and strictly limited. It became permanent because it was quicker, easier, more convenient, and more cost-effective.



Corn

Temporary and strictly limited. The four most permanent words in government.



Herman

And the vocabulary is its own layer. The CIA's euphemism for these officers was Controlled American Sources. CAS. According to John Prados at the National Security Archive, it probably originated as an indicator that information came from a US asset, but it became a stand-in for CIA station.



Corn

So the phrase for the station was a phrase that didn't say station.



Herman

Part of the deliberate fiction that there was no such thing as a CIA station. The agency maintained that for decades.



Corn

Why maintain it if everyone knows?



Herman

Because everyone knowing and everyone saying are different things. A foreign government that officially knows has to officially respond. A foreign government that suspects gets to pretend it doesn't, and so do you. The fiction is a courtesy both sides can use.



Corn

Now the actual long tail. The list.



Herman

The Wikipedia list of known CIA station chiefs. And it's explicitly partial. Built from leaks, memoirs, and journalism. But look at what's on it. Bangui, in the Central African Republic. N'Djamena. Vientiane. Kinshasa. Katanga. Burundi. Kingston, Jamaica. Luxembourg. Bern. Santo Domingo. Tegucigalpa. Medan and Surabaya, in Indonesia. Lahore. Quito.



Corn

Bern.



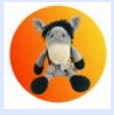
Herman

Bern. Alongside the expected London, Moscow, Paris, Rome.



Corn

So the tail isn't a theory. It's a list.



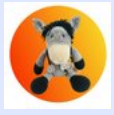
Herman

And it's a floor. That's the thing. Every name on that list is a station somebody leaked. The stations nobody leaked aren't on it.



Corn

How do we get the names we do have?



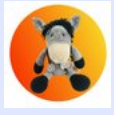
Herman

Leaks, memoirs, and later disclosures. Philip Agee's cover in Quito was assistant attaché, political officer, with rank R-8. Foreign Service Reserve Officer. A designation commonly used for CIA officers. His station chief was James B. Noland, posted 1957, rank R-6.



Corn

So we know Noland's name and his pay grade because Agee wrote it down.



Herman

And sometimes the disclosure is a government sending a message. In 2017, the Brazilian government broke protocol and blew the cover of the CIA chief in Brazil. In 2013, the FSB publicly named the CIA's Moscow station chief in retaliation for Ryan Fogle's activities.



Corn

So the map gets drawn in public when someone wants to humiliate someone else.



Herman

Or when someone defects, or when a memoir gets published, or when a records release forces it out. Which brings us to the 2025 JFK records release, where the Schlesinger memo becomes public. That's how a 1961 complaint about embassy staffing becomes a 2025 data point about the geography of espionage.



Corn

And Tel Aviv. Mossad's model.



Herman

Structurally different. Mossad's Tzomet division runs case officers, katsas, overseas under a variety of covers. Diplomatic and unofficial. And then there's the sayanim.



Corn

The sayanim being what?



Herman

Unpaid Jewish civilians providing logistical support. Not employees. Volunteers, in the operational sense. In 1998, the estimate was four thousand in Britain and sixteen thousand in the United States.



Corn

Sixteen thousand people in the US alone who would never appear on an embassy staff list.



Herman

Which is the point of the contrast. The CIA's model shows up in a diplomatic roster. You can count it. Sixteen of twenty in Vienna. Mossad's model doesn't show up anywhere, because most of it isn't in an embassy at all.



Corn

So the two services have different geographies. One you can map from leaks, one you can't map at all.



Herman

Mossad has an estimated seven thousand employees and a budget of about two point seven three billion dollars. One of the largest espionage agencies in the world. And its overseas footprint is largely invisible to the method we've been using all episode.



Corn

Which means the long tail is longer than the CIA list suggests. Because the list only measures one model.



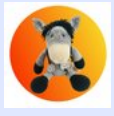
Herman

That's the honest conclusion. The documented tail is long. The real tail is longer, and some of it doesn't look like a tail at all.



Corn

There's one more contradiction I want to name, because I think it's the actual finding.



Herman

Go.



Corn

The CIA's own map archive lists a hundred and ten countries. That implies near-universal presence. And the Schlesinger memo implies an agency so stretched it was stuffing embassies with case officers under State cover. Those two pictures don't obviously fit.



Herman

They fit if you separate permanent capability from surge capacity. A hundred and ten countries with some footprint. A much smaller number with a big station. And in 1961, the agency was leaning on State cover because it needed bodies in places where the permanent infrastructure didn't exist yet.



Corn

So the tail isn't just long. It's uneven. A big station in Vienna. A small one in Bangui. And the small ones are the ones we hear about least, which is exactly backwards from what you'd expect.



Herman

The famous hubs are famous because they're big and because people write about them. The long tail is long and quiet. Quiet is the whole design.



Herman

Which connects to something Agee's file shows. The R-8 designation. Foreign Service Reserve Officer. That's a real State Department personnel category, used for real State Department people too. So the cover isn't a fake badge. It's a genuine category with genuine paperwork, and the CIA officer inside it is indistinguishable on paper from a diplomat.



Corn

So you can't audit your way to the answer.



Herman

You can't. Which is why the only reliable method is the one we've been using. Wait for someone to talk.



Corn

I keep thinking about the Vienna number. Sixteen of twenty. If you were a real Foreign Service officer in that political section, you were one of four.



Herman

And you knew. Everyone in that section knew who was who. The fiction is for the outside, not the inside.



Corn

The outside being the host government.



Herman

And the host government's own service, which is doing the same thing back to you in your capital. That's the symmetry nobody says out loud. Vienna had sixteen of twenty. What did the Austrian service have in Washington?



Corn

Probably a nice office. I want to stay on the postal thing for a second, because I think it's the most underrated part of this whole history.



Herman

The cabinet noir.



Corn

You said the few agents in the postal system. That's the original long tail. Before there were stations, before there were embassies full of case officers, there were a handful of people in a mail room, and that was the entire foreign intelligence capability of a great power.



Herman

And it worked because the mail was the only channel. If you wanted to communicate across borders, you wrote a letter, and the letter went through a system the state could reach into.



Corn

Which means the modern equivalent isn't the embassy. It's the cable. It's the undersea fiber. It's whatever channel everyone trusts because it's the only one.



Herman

And the interception has moved to the chokepoints. Which is exactly where the cabinet noir lived.



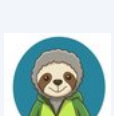
Corn

The chokepoint is always the answer.



Herman

Rachkovsky's antenna in Paris is the other half of it. The Okhrana didn't just read mail. They put a permanent person in a foreign city to watch a specific population. Revolutionaries. That's a station in everything but name, and it's 1880s.



Corn

So the antenna predates the bureau.



Herman

By decades. The capability shows up before the institution, every time. That's the pattern from 1252 to 1909 to now.



Corn

Which means the question Daniel's asking isn't really about when services were founded. It's about when the physical presence showed up. And the answer is: earlier than the org chart.



Herman

Earlier than the org chart, and in more places than the org chart admits.



Corn

Let me try the Jerusalem piece, because Daniel specifically raised it and I want to be careful.



Herman

Careful how?



Corn

The general pattern is well documented. Stations at embassies, sometimes at consulates, sometimes under non-embassy cover. That's not in dispute.



Herman

Right.



Corn

But the specific claim, that the US runs a separate CIA station at its Jerusalem consulate, distinct from the Tel Aviv embassy. I couldn't substantiate that. Not from anything public.



Herman

That's a real finding, not a dodge. The general pattern is documented. The Jerusalem-specific claim isn't. Those are different things and we shouldn't blur them.



Corn

We flag it as unresolved.



Herman

Flag it as unresolved. Which is itself the lesson. The map we can draw is the map somebody leaked. The parts nobody leaked are exactly the parts that matter most to the people involved.



Corn

There's no standalone comprehensive list. Not of every city hosting a station. By design.



Herman

By design. The closest thing is that partial Wikipedia list, built from leaks and memoirs and journalism. Everything else is inference.



Corn

The honest answer to Daniel's question is: yes, there's a long tail, and we can see maybe a fraction of it.



Herman

The fraction we can see includes Bangui and N'Djamena and Kingston. Which should tell you something about the fraction we can't.



Corn

It should tell you the tail is longer than the list.



Herman

Considerably.



Corn

The late nineties. I was doing contract work for a shipping outfit that held a State Department pouch contract.



Corn

Hold on.



Corn

I ran a route through three of the cities you just read out.



Herman

The pouch service.



Corn

Diplomatic pouch. Not for any intelligence agency, I want to be clear. For a shipping company that had the contract. I moved the bags. I didn't open the bags.



Corn

What were you told?



Corn

Don't ask. That was the whole training. Don't ask, don't look, don't weigh it, don't talk about it on the plane. You sign for it, you hand it off, you sign again.



Herman

You're saying the cities were on our list.



Corn

Three of them. I'm not going to say which three. But they weren't London and they weren't Moscow.



Corn

The tail isn't theoretical to you.



Corn

The tail is a route sheet. But here's the thing I wanted to say. You both kept saying station. In all that time, I never once heard that word.



Herman

What did they say?



Corn

The office. Or our friends downstairs. That was the phrase. Our friends downstairs. And I think people assume the euphemism is for foreign governments. It isn't. It's for people like me. A courier who never heard the word station can honestly say he never heard of a station. That's the point. You can put him in front of anybody and he'll tell the truth.



Herman

The fiction has a support layer.



Corn

Thousands of us. Locally employed staff, drivers, contractors, people who move the furniture. None of us know anything, and all of us are telling the truth.



Corn

There was one route where the pouch was heavier going out than coming back.



Herman

Heavier out.



Corn

Noticeably. I asked once. I was told the difference was paperwork.



Corn

Paperwork.



Corn

I still think about it. I don't know what it was. I'm not going to pretend I know what it was.



Herman

Do you think it was paperwork?



Corn

I think if you're moving something out of a country and it weighs more than what came in, and the answer you get is paperwork, you stop asking. That's what I did. I stopped asking.



Corn

The weight difference is just a thing you carry.



Corn

It's a thing I carried. Many times. Anyway.



Corn

A relative is expecting you?



Corn

My sister-in-law. She's been expecting me since Tuesday. I should go.



Corn

Go. We'll finish up.



Corn

That's the thing. The fiction has a whole support layer. And the support layer's job is to not know.



Herman

Which is the cleanest version of the whole episode. The long tail isn't just stations nobody leaked. It's people who were paid to never have heard of one.



Corn

The pouch. Which is the cabinet noir with a courier and a signature.



Herman

The mail again. It's always the mail.



Corn

What do we still not know? There's no comprehensive public list of every city hosting a station. That's not an oversight, it's the design. The closest thing is that partial list built from leaks and memoirs.



Herman

The Jerusalem piece specifically. Whether the US runs a separate station at the consulate, distinct from Tel Aviv. We couldn't substantiate it. The general pattern is documented. That specific claim isn't.



Corn

Which is the honest place to land. We can document the tail. We can't measure it.



Herman

The 2025 JFK records release and the Schlesinger memo are the best proxies we have. And they suggest the tail is longer and stranger than the famous-hub picture implies.



Corn

Next time you see an embassy staff list, remember Vienna. Sixteen of twenty. And remember that the vocabulary is built so that even the people carrying the pouches can honestly say they never heard of a station.



Herman

That's the one to sit with.



Corn

That's My Weird Prompts. Thanks as always to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop. If you want to find the archive, it's all at my weird prompts dot com. Email us at show at my weird prompts dot com. We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you then.