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Culture

The Mystery of the Immaculate Concussion

He was a senior CIA official tasked with getting tough on Russia. Then, one night in Moscow, Marc Polymeropoulos's life changed forever. He says he was hit with a mysterious weapon, joining dozens of American diplomats and spies who believe they've been targeted with this secret device all over the world—and even at home, on U.S. soil. Now, as a CIA investigation points the blame at Russia, the victims are left wondering why so little is being done by the Trump administration.

BY JULIA IOFFE

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Marc Polymeropoulos awoke with a start. The feeling of nausea was overwhelming. Food poisoning, he thought, and decided to head for the bathroom. But when he tried to get out of bed, he fell over. He tried to stand up and fell again. It was the early morning hours of December 5, 2017, and his Moscow hotel room was spinning around him. His ears were ringing. He felt, he recalled, “like I was going to both throw up and pass out at the same time.”

Polymeropoulos was a covert CIA operative, a jovial, burly man who likes to refer to himself as “grizzled.” Moscow was not the first time he had been on enemy territory. He had spent most of his career in the Middle East, fighting America’s long war on terrorism. He had hunted terrorists in Pakistan and Yemen. He did the same in Iraq and Afghanistan. He had been shot at, ducked under rocket fire, and had shrapnel whiz by uncomfortably close to his head. But that night, paralyzed with seasickness in the landlocked Russian capital, Polymeropoulos felt terrified and utterly helpless for the first time.

Struggling to regain control over his body, Polymeropoulos couldn’t have imagined that this incident would upend his life. It would end a promising career that had just catapulted him into the ranks of senior CIA leadership, and threw him into the middle of a growing international mystery that has puzzled diplomats and scientists, and raised concerns on Capitol Hill. In the months ahead, he would come to realize that it wasn’t a spoiled sandwich that had mowed him down. Rather, it was his macabre initiation into a growing club of dozens of American diplomats, spies, and government employees posted abroad who were suffering in much the same way he was—targets of what some experts and doctors now believe were attacks perpetrated by unknown assailants wielding novel directed energy weapons. Though many of these apparent attacks have been publicized,

including those that took place in Cuba and China, others have not been revealed until now, including at least three incidents that officials from the CIA and Capitol Hill say targeted American citizens on American soil.



Former CIA official Marc Polymeropoulos visiting Moscow in late 2017, where he says he was attacked by a microwave weapon. Courtesy of Marc Polymeropoulos

A loyal soldier of the CIA even after his untimely retirement, Polymeropoulos has never detailed publicly what he calls his “silent wounds.” But in the year since he left, he has become increasingly frustrated by the Agency’s reluctance to give him and the other CIA officers affected with the medical care they need. “It’s incumbent on them to provide the medical help we require, which does not include telling us that we’re all making it up,” he told me. “I want the Agency to treat this as a combat injury.” He has also grown alarmed that the Agency and this administration are neither investigating nor pushing back against the apparent perpetrators who are targeting his old comrades—and other Americans—in increasingly brazen ways. (In a statement to *GQ*, CIA representatives said that “the Agency’s top priority is the health and well-being of our officers followed very closely by collecting on hard targets, including Russia, and providing that intelligence to policymakers. Suggestions otherwise in your story are simply not true.”)

“There is a lot of incredible unease and disgust with the Agency leadership and the Office of Medical Services on this issue,” Polymeropoulos told me. That leadership, he says, “has not done right by us.” “There’s a lot of people who are very upset. And how can I say this? The Agency is going to have to answer for this.”

Polymeropoulos arrived in Moscow at the end of Donald Trump’s first, chaotic year in the White House. Shortly before Trump was inaugurated, the intelligence community released its **conclusions** that the Russian government had successfully meddled in the 2016 presidential election. It was the kind of high-confidence, public assessment that rarely came out of the fractious world of U.S. intelligence. Yet the new president dismissed their findings and denigrated intelligence officers as the “deep state” who wanted nothing more than to thwart his agenda. He also seemed determined to make nice with the Kremlin, even going so far as inviting the Russian foreign minister into the Oval Office in May 2017, and using the occasion to **mock** ousted FBI director James Comey and to **share** highly classified Israeli intelligence with the Russians—without Jerusalem’s sign-off. “I remember thinking this is like George W. Bush inviting bin Laden after 9/11 and saying, ‘Eh, we’re good,’ ” Polymeropoulos told me. “Stuff like that that really alarmed us considerably.” Some of it, he added, made his “head explode.”

Not only were the president’s overtures to Vladimir Putin concerning, they were also in direct contradiction to the work Polymeropoulos was doing at CIA headquarters in

Langley, Virginia. In late January 2017, Polymeropoulos had been transferred from the CIA's counterterrorism division and promoted to a new role: deputy chief of operations for the Europe and Eurasia Mission Center, the EEMC. The CIA's leadership, along with then director Mike Pompeo, decided that it was time to start pushing back on Russian active-measures campaigns more aggressively and that the best way to show the Kremlin that the Americans were serious was to bring in the tough guys who had spent the past 15 years in the Middle East. These people, like Polymeropoulos, didn't know much about Russia, its history, or its culture. "We knew nothing on Russia," Polymeropoulos admits. But, like his Russian counterparts, he and his counterterrorism comrades were fluent in the language of force.

Polymeropoulos's new job was to run clandestine operations across the Center's approximately 50 stations, which dotted the landscape from Ireland to Azerbaijan. As far as the Agency and Polymeropoulos saw it, the area in between—Europe, Ukraine, Turkey, the Caucasus—was now a battleground between the United States and Russia. Polymeropoulos issued what he refers to as "a call to arms." "Every station was directed to refocus its efforts on Russia," he explained. "It goes back to the old days where, in every station around the world, there was a Soviet branch. We wanted to reconstitute that because Russia can't be ignored anymore." Though Polymeropoulos and the other counterterrorism officers brought in for this new mission were mostly skilled at tracking suspected terrorists, they had to rely on a different skill set in dealing with the Russians. "The best way you do covert influence traditionally is with the truth," Polymeropoulos told me. "And Russian operations and covert influence is so easy because we never have to say, like, you know, Putin likes little boys in the back of his car. You don't make stuff up to embarrass him. You just say what they do." This involved exposing Russian operations across the continent—like the efforts **to stop Macedonia** from changing its name and to **sponsor a coup** in Montenegro—by working with local intelligence services to make sure that the European public knew that the Kremlin was trying to manipulate them. (The Russian government has denied its involvement in these events.)

To this day, Polymeropoulos doesn't know how much President Trump knew of the work he was doing at the EEMC. "Did he go down and brief the president?" Polymeropoulos said of Pompeo. "I don't know, and it doesn't even matter because we were given kind of the green light to go ahead and do it... It was simply a matter of us deciding internally in the CIA, this is what we're going to do. We don't need any kind of approval on that. It's not like we were killing Russians." (That *would* require high-level permission because

physically targeting the officers of a sovereign country creates a different level of political risk. Polymeropoulos, along with other sources familiar with the CIA's counterintelligence efforts, insists that at no point did these efforts involve physically harming Russian operatives.)

In the fall of 2017, Polymeropoulos and an Agency colleague decided they wanted to go to Russia. Polymeropoulos had never been before, and he and his colleague thought a trip might be useful. They could meet with the American ambassador and embassy staff, and perhaps open a more direct and fruitful line of communication with their counterparts in Russian intelligence. They told the Russians they wanted to meet with American embassy staff in Moscow—and to talk with the Russian government about counterterrorism cooperation, which is one of the few areas where the United States and Russia still work together, at least formally. This was despite the feeling—**widely held at the agency**—that the efforts have yielded little in recent years and have become, according to Polymeropoulos, a “staggering waste of time.”

Moscow granted Polymeropoulos and his colleague visas, but the Russian embassy in Washington told Polymeropoulos directly that they did not want him to make the trip. According to Polymeropoulos, they said they did not buy the Americans' excuse of wanting to further counterterrorism cooperation and feared they were actually coming to Russia to run covert operations, an allegation Polymeropoulos denies. It is just not how espionage works, Polymeropoulos explained. At the time, he was the equivalent of a four-star general, and no one of his high rank, on either the American or the Russian side, would ever go and run operations on the ground in person. Moreover, Polymeropoulos explained, it was normal for the top officials in the clandestine services to meet and talk. “We have liaison with them,” he told me, using Agency-speak for having a channel of communication. “And that's not a bad thing at all. We have to meet them. Even in the worst times, during [the existence of] the Soviet Union, there was always liaison between the Agency and the KGB. There's got to be a channel. And there's been trips all the time.”

Despite the Russians' warnings, Polymeropoulos and his colleague set off for Moscow in December 2017. The trip started off well. He and his colleague, who declined to be interviewed for this article, checked into the Marriott near the U.S. embassy. They met with then ambassador Jon Huntsman and other embassy staffers. They were ostentatiously followed everywhere by half a dozen FSB tails, but it didn't stop Polymeropoulos and his colleague from seeing the sights—a local McDonald's, the fabled

Moscow Metro, and dive bars where Russian patrons earnestly asked them why Americans hate Russians so much.

The official part of the visit was less fun. The meeting with the FSB was numbingly boring and the meeting with the SVR, the Russian foreign intelligence service, quickly devolved into bitter recriminations. SVR officers told Polymeropoulos and his colleague bluntly that they had not wanted them to come and could not understand why they had shown up in Moscow anyway. “You are not welcome here,” Polymeropoulos remembers them telling him. Then the Russians launched into a long lecture on America’s systemic racism and the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. Polymeropoulos turned to one of his colleagues and asked, “Is this guy fucking kidding? Like, are you serious?” The colleague assured Polymeropoulos that this was a standard Russian practice going back more than half a century. Polymeropoulos countered by warning the Russians to stop meddling in American elections. The Russians denied they would ever do such a thing. It was the way most Russian officials behave in such meetings at all levels of government—a lecture about American racism, theatrical incredulity and hurt feelings that the Americans would think the Russians had meddled in American politics. Still, Polymeropoulos was stunned by how unabashedly combative his Russian counterparts were. He had spent his career in a region where people were exceedingly polite, rolling out banquets and plying him with tea, even as he knew they were plotting to kill him. He knew the Russians didn’t like him, but “I would have expected them to be a little more polite,” Polymeropoulos told me.

Nonetheless, he figured that this was little more than bluster. He knew he had to be careful in Russia and to be wary of Russian agents trying to entrap him in compromising situations—for example, the beautiful young women at the rooftop bar of the Moscow Ritz-Carlton who seemed determined to chat up him and his colleague. But Polymeropoulos figured he had no reason to fear for his physical safety. Even after that awful night in the Marriott, Polymeropoulos did not immediately suspect anything malicious. By morning, the worst of the symptoms had passed and he seemed to be doing better, confirming his suspicion that it had just been something he’d eaten. Just a few hours after he’d been incapacitated, he managed to get on a train to St. Petersburg, where he felt well enough to walk for miles, duck into more dive bars, and even glimpse the famous **troll factory**. He even did some Christmas shopping for his wife and kids. That miserable, terrifying night in his Moscow hotel room receded in his memory.

Two days before the end of his trip, Polymeropoulos and his colleagues were eating dinner at Pushkin, a posh Moscow restaurant, when he suddenly felt the room begin to spin again, just as it had in the hotel room that night. A wave of nausea hit, and he was suddenly drenched in sweat. He barely made it back to his hotel room, where, having canceled all his meetings, he stayed for the rest of his trip, unable to move. His body was in revolt, and he had no idea why. “I made it back on the airplane somehow,” Polymeropoulos said.

It wasn’t until Polymeropoulos got home to the Virginia suburbs that it occurred to him that what had happened in Moscow was possibly the result of something far more sinister than what he’d originally suspected. In February, after a few weeks of relative normalcy, he started feeling an intense and painful pressure that started in the back of his head and radiated forward into his face. He went to an ear, nose, and throat specialist, who, Polymeropoulos says, thought it might be a sinus infection. But Polymeropoulos’s scans were clear, and a course of antibiotics did not alleviate the pain. If anything, it was growing steadily worse. The vertigo and nausea came roaring back. His ears started ringing again. His brain was swathed in a dense fog. By March, his long-distance vision started going and he could no longer drive. Repeated MRI and CAT scans showed nothing suspicious, but Polymeropoulos was now feeling so ill that he started calling out sick.

There was no way this was all the result of food poisoning two months prior, Polymeropoulos realized. But what could it have been? He told me his colleagues at the CIA believed he could have been the target of some kind of technical attack in Moscow. But what kind? Polymeropoulos wondered if the Russians had inadvertently injured him while trying to collect the data in his phone remotely. It was the kind of thing all intelligence services did, the Americans included. Polymeropoulos figured the Russians had just “turned up the juice too much.”

But as his symptoms grew worse, Polymeropoulos and his Agency colleagues noticed that his symptoms lined up with those of **American diplomats** who had apparently been attacked in Havana.

In late 2016, some two dozen Americans stationed in the revived embassy in Cuba began

reporting strange new phenomena. Some heard a strange noise—sometimes high-pitched, sometimes low—and felt a sudden pressure in the skull. Others heard nothing at all, but many of them developed vertigo and nausea, and had trouble sleeping, difficulty concentrating, persistent headaches, and changes in vision and hearing. Like Polymeropoulos's constellation of symptoms, some of these effects waxed and waned at seemingly random intervals, while others seemed impossible to cure—all to maddening effect.

As word of what was happening in Havana seeped out into the press, everyone seemed to have an opinion on the events, but no one, not even the CIA, knew for certain who was responsible—or even what had happened. Some speculated that it had been an **acoustic attack**. Some believed the culprits were hardliners in the Cuban security services who had been determined to sabotage Havana's new détente with Washington. Still others believed it was all made up, the product of paranoid imaginations or collective anxiety.

Some of the two dozen Americans affected in Havana **had been CIA officers** under diplomatic cover. Though these apparent attacks baffled officials at the Agency, there was growing suspicion inside CIA headquarters, according to two sources familiar with the discussions, that these attacks had been the work of Russian security services. It was not a wild stretch, and many in Washington's foreign policy and national security universe were thinking along the same lines. Since 2014, the Russians had become **increasingly brazen** in going after the U.S. and its allies, and they had every reason to peel their old Cuban allies away from the Americans' embrace. "These guys have been told they can take the gloves off and do whatever they want to hurt Americans," says a former national security official. "They're trying to weaken us generally, and they've obviously taken the gloves off quite some time ago."

By the spring of 2018, Polymeropoulos was convinced he was a new addition to the Havana victims' ranks. What's more, he told me, the Agency colleague who had accompanied him to Moscow was now also sick and had lost hearing in one of his ears. But, according to Polymeropoulos, the leadership of the CIA's Office of Medical Services (OMS) told him they didn't agree. They put Polymeropoulos through a series of tests they had developed in an attempt to see if he had, in fact, suffered the same brain injuries as the CIA officers in Havana. They asked him to walk in a straight line and to perform simple cognitive tasks. But by this time, Polymeropoulos's vertigo had disappeared. Despite the pain and debilitating fatigue, he could now walk just fine, even if he hadn't

been able to stand up without falling over that night in Moscow. It didn't seem to matter. The OMS doctors declared that he had passed the test: no Havana Syndrome. Polymeropoulos told me that his colleague was also cleared. (In a statement to *GQ*, Keith Bass, the director of the Office of Medical Services, said, "CIA's Office of Medical Services would, of course, never comment on anyone's physical or mental health, but I will reiterate that our top priority is taking care of Agency personnel.")

Still, the intense pressure and pain in Polymeropoulos's head would not abate. He started seeing doctors on his own—neurologists, infectious-disease specialists, allergists, dentists, eye doctors, sleep specialists, pain experts, neck and spine doctors. Countless tests, scans, injections, rounds of steroids, and antibiotics did nothing to diagnose or alleviate the now round-the-clock migraine he had developed. He was in constant pain, which was exacerbated by his staring at a computer for long periods of time. Sitting still for more than an hour or two would sap his energy completely. But the demands of Polymeropoulos's job didn't let up. Running the CIA's clandestine operations across Europe and Eurasia and managing thousands of agents required 12-hour days, packed with long meetings and hours spent in front of computer screens. Before long, he had taken a total of four months off of work, maxing out his sick leave.

Meanwhile, the roster of victims was growing ever longer. In June 2018, the U.S. State Department **evacuated** nearly a dozen people from Guangzhou, China, where American diplomats and trade representatives reported feeling symptoms eerily similar to those their colleagues had experienced in Cuba. One victim, Catherine Werner, **said** that her symptoms began in late 2017, just as Polymeropoulos's had: a splitting headache, nausea, loss of balance. When her mother went to Guangzhou to help her, she, too, fell ill. Even Werner's dogs were affected, her mother **told** NBC News. They began vomiting blood and avoiding the room where Werner and her mother heard the sounds and felt the symptoms start.

Yet Polymeropoulos was still having trouble getting the CIA's medical bureaucracy to take his condition seriously. As far as they were concerned, he says, he had passed the test they had administered, even though they could not explain his persistent migraine. Frustrated by their inability to help him, Polymeropoulos asked OMS to refer him to the Center for Brain Injury and Repair, at the University of Pennsylvania, where some of the Havana victims had gone for treatment. The team had **published a study** in the prestigious *Journal of the American Medical Association* about what had come to be

widely known as the Havana Syndrome. They evaluated 21 of the Havana victims and found the kind of damage to cognitive, balance, motor, and sensory functions associated with a severe concussion. Unlike with most concussions, however, these symptoms did not quickly dissipate. Instead, they lasted for months, waxing and waning over time.

The neurologists at the University of Pennsylvania found that some explanations for the Havana Syndrome, including mass hysteria and group psychosis, were highly unlikely. Many of the patients didn't know each other, their performance on these tests could not have been faked, and they did not wallow in their pain. In fact, according to the study, they were desperately trying to get better and "were largely determined to continue to work or return to full duty, even when encouraged by health care professionals to take sick leave." The study also concluded that these injuries were likely not caused by exposure to chemicals, since no organs other than the brain were involved. Nor were they likely to have been the product of a viral infection, the doctors said, because these patients did not display associated symptoms, like a spiking fever. Still, the University of Pennsylvania researchers couldn't explain what actually *had* happened to these patients. Their brain scans were basically normal, and the doctors could not fathom what could have caused this kind of brain injury, one that refused to heal. "These individuals appeared to have sustained injury to widespread brain networks without an associated history of head trauma," the study's authors concluded. Doctors and patients **began referring** to it as the "immaculate concussion."

In the spring of 2018, a private neurologist gave Polymeropoulos a diagnosis: occipital neuralgia, a condition resulting from damage to the two nerves that run from the base of the skull, curving toward the front of the head. Despite the private diagnosis, Polymeropoulos says the Agency kept refusing to refer him to the University of Pennsylvania, telling him it wasn't necessary.

As he grasped for an explanation, Polymeropoulos was paying careful attention to what was being discovered about the incidents in Cuba and China. By the summer of 2018, scientists, intelligence officials, and journalists were **zeroing in** on a potential culprit: microwave weapons.

The notion of weaponizing microwaves dates back to the Cold War, when, in 1961, an

American biologist named Allan Frey **discovered** that irradiating a human head with microwaves could produce the sensation of sound—even in deaf ears, even from thousands of feet away. Playing with the frequency and intensity of the microwave beam could produce a range of different sensations in a person. In 2018, Frey **told the *New York Times*** that the Soviets took immediate notice of his work and flew him to Moscow, where they squirmed him around secret military facilities and asked him to give lectures about the effects of microwaves on the brain.

As the Cold War progressed, both the United States and the Soviet Union raced to find military uses for what came to be called directed energy weapons. American researchers had studied things like beaming words into subjects' heads—great for psychological warfare—while also researching the thermal aspects of microwaves. Packaged in the right way, **researchers theorized**, a microwave weapon could be mounted on a truck, where it could cast a beam outward to create an invisible barrier anywhere, anytime, capable of immobilizing any person who got within its range. This research ultimately culminated in the development of a weapon the Pentagon calls an Active Denial System, or ADS. In a **video** touting its capabilities, the U.S. military boasts that this highly portable weapon can be attached to a military vehicle and used to direct precise beams of electromagnetic radiation at, say, an armed militant in a crowd or a suspicious person approaching a military checkpoint. The beam would instantaneously produce a sensation of heat on the skin, which would trigger a person's reflex to flee. (This summer, a military official **inquired** about deploying the technology against American protesters who flooded into the streets of Washington, D.C., to protest police brutality.)

On the other side of the world, the Soviets focused on the non-thermal applications of microwave radiation. A **1976 report** compiled by the Pentagon's intelligence branch, the Defense Intelligence Agency, reviewed Soviet research on the topic. The report detailed Moscow's investigation of the effects of microwaves on the nervous system. Soviet, and later Russian, scientists found that exposing an animal's brain to microwaves changed the frequency at which neurons fired. Neurons also became suddenly out of sync with one another. Some brain cells in mice were found to have withered. Nerves became damaged. The radiation also showed the potential to disturb the sacrosanct blood-brain barrier and, according to the DIA, resulted in "the alterations of brain function." The most common symptoms reported in humans who had been exposed to microwaves for long periods of time sounded familiar: headache, fatigue, perspiration, dizziness, insomnia, depression, anxiety, forgetfulness, and lack of concentration.

Like Frey, Soviet researchers found that turning the intensity of the beam up or down could produce differing effects in its target. A target's unique physiology—a slightly different curvature of the skull, for example—also determined how this directed energy would affect them. A weapon that created an ever-changing kaleidoscope of neurological symptoms would have a powerful psychological dimension. If everyone's symptoms are all slightly different, victims might question whether they'd all been exposed to the same thing—or if they'd been hit at all.

In September 2018, a California physician and scientist named Beatrice Golomb **published a paper** that tried to link the suffering of American diplomats to directed microwaves. She connected what came to be known as the Frey effect—using microwaves to create the false sensation of sound—with the fact that some, but not all, of the diplomats in Havana reported hearing the kinds of noise described by Allan Frey. This would suggest that these symptoms were not the result of sonic attacks, as some had speculated. She also offered an insight that could explain Polymeropoulos's persistent migraines. "Brain injury may be a predisposing factor for...[microwave] injury," she wrote. That is, people like Polymeropoulos, who was frequently around explosions in his time in Middle Eastern war zones, may be especially vulnerable to brain injury from directed microwave weapons.

Not all scientists agree with Golomb's conclusions, and some challenge her methodology. Andrei Pakhomov, a scientist who studied microwaves both in Russia and in the United States and wrote a comprehensive review of Soviet research on the subject, told me he is still not convinced that microwaves could do this kind of damage. Douglas Smith, a neurosurgeon who heads the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Brain Injury and Repair and was the principal investigator on the *JAMA* study, says he doesn't understand how microwaves could target an organ so precisely, damaging the brain but not any peripheral nerves. Still, the fact that the Havana victims felt the buzzing and tingling on one side of their face, or that the sensation stopped when they moved to another room, indicated to Smith that these injuries were caused by some kind of directed energy weapon. "We believe there was something directed, but we don't know what it was," he told me. "It is quite a mystery. There's no question that something happened, but there's not a fingerprint for this kind of injury."

If the incidents were connected to directed energy weapons, the question remained: Who was deploying them against U.S. personnel? Russia certainly had the technology, but

several other countries had also developed or purchased these capabilities. A Ukrainian researcher had reportedly sold the technology to the Saudi government. The Chinese and possibly the Iranian governments are also said to possess these capabilities. The Cuban government adamantly denied hitting American diplomats, but their security services were notoriously close to Moscow's. Surely, the Russians could have shared the technology with their old anti-American allies?

Sitting in his office in Langley, Polymeropoulos was convinced he knew who was behind these apparent attacks: Moscow. He had been charged with pushing back against the Russians, and now, he figured, the Russians were retaliating, including against him personally. Without conclusive intelligence linking the attacks to the Kremlin, however, there was little he could do. As the 2018 holiday season—and the one-year anniversary of that night in the Marriott—rolled around, Polymeropoulos had an idea. It was customary for the heads of the Russian and American clandestine services to exchange holiday cards. By now he understood the Russians well enough to know that the ritual of these kinds of holiday swaps was extremely important in Russian culture, especially in the world of Russian bureaucracy. It was a sign of respect and an acknowledgment of status. Before the cards went out, Polymeropoulos wrote to the new CIA director, his old comrade Gina Haspel, and asked her not to send holiday cards to the Russians that year. According to sources familiar with the incident, Polymeropoulos had hit his mark: The Russians were furious.

In April 2019, after 26 years at the agency, Polymeropoulos decided to retire from the CIA. He was a decorated senior intelligence officer serving in a top post, and he was still relatively young—there had been talk of promotions, an even bigger future. But whatever happened in the Moscow Marriott had changed all that. “I had a lot more to offer,” Polymeropoulos told me. “I was 50, but I had to retire because these goddamn headaches don’t go away.” In July of that year, he walked out of Langley for the last time.

Gradually, Polymeropoulos settled into his post-CIA life. He got a contract to write a book about leadership. A speaking agent promised him a few lucrative turns on the lecture circuit before the pandemic put an end to all that. But he was still struggling with constant migraines, fatigue, and an inability to concentrate. He had heard that some people suffering from the Havana Syndrome were getting effective treatment at Walter

Reed, the nation's top military hospital, but he would need a referral from CIA doctors to go there. Even after his injury had forced his retirement, he says, the leadership at the OMS refused to help.

Polymeropoulos was still in touch with his friends and colleagues at Langley, and what they told him alarmed him. Apparent attacks were continuing around the world. Two sources with knowledge of the situation—and who asked for anonymity to discuss matters that they did not have authorization to disclose to the press—told me about the ongoing attacks. In the fall of 2019, two top CIA officials, both in the clandestine service, traveled to Australia to meet with officials in that country's spy agency. (Australia is part of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance with the U.S., the U.K., Canada, and New Zealand.) While in their hotel rooms in Australia, both of the Americans felt it: the strange sound, the pressure in their heads, the ringing in their ears. According to these sources, they became nauseous and dizzy. They then traveled on to Taiwan to meet with intelligence officials there. They felt it again while in their hotel rooms on the island.

By now, this was no longer a novel occurrence, and CIA people had come to call it “getting hit.” One senior intelligence officer in EEMC, the Center Polymeropoulos used to run, had gotten hit twice while traveling under cover, first in Poland in the spring of 2019, then again in Tbilisi, Georgia, that fall. He, too, was diagnosed with occipital neuralgia and experienced symptoms similar to Polymeropoulos's. (He declined to be interviewed for this article.)

According to these sources, the attacks were becoming increasingly daring: One of the CIA officials hit in Australia and Taiwan was among the agency's five highest-ranking officials.

Whoever was behind the attacks also began going after Americans on American soil. An American diplomat and his spouse, who had been hit when they were stationed in China, traveled to Philadelphia to get specialized treatment at the University of Pennsylvania. One night in June 2018, according to three government sources, the couple was startled awake by a sound and pressure in their heads similar to what they had felt back in China. On the advice of FBI agents, the family moved to a hotel, but on their second night there, they were again awoken in the early morning hours. Terrified, the parents ran into the room where their children were sleeping to find them moving in their sleep, bizarrely and in unison. In the weeks afterward, the children developed vision and balance difficulties.

The family members, whose identities *GQ* is not revealing for privacy reasons, declined to be interviewed for this story. “I can’t say anything about that,” says attorney Janine Brookner, who represents the family.

Then, shortly after Thanksgiving 2019, according to three sources familiar with the incident, a White House staffer was hit while walking her dog in Arlington, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, D.C. According to a government source familiar with the incident, the staffer passed a parked van. A man got out and walked past her. Her dog started seizing up. Then she felt it too: a high-pitched ringing in her ears, an intense headache, and a tingling on the side of her face.

According to the source, this had happened to the staffer before. In August 2019, she had accompanied John Bolton, who was then the national security adviser, on a trip to London. The staffer, whom *GQ* is not identifying out of concerns for her privacy, did not respond to requests for comment. According to the government source, she was in her hotel room when she suddenly felt a tingling in the side of her head that was facing the window. The intense pressure in her head was accompanied by a tinning in her ears. When she left the room, the symptoms stopped. She reported the incident to the Secret Service because it was uncannily similar to the symptoms described by American diplomats who had served in Cuba and China.

While the CIA is not typically involved in investigations of domestic incidents, two sources familiar with the attack on the White House staffer told me that the Agency began looking into the matter and, last December, briefed the National Security Council’s unit on biodefense. But by the end of the month, the unit had become completely consumed with a brand new threat coming from overseas: COVID-19. (The White House did not respond to *GQ*’s request for comment.)

In the meantime, a team was assembled at Langley to investigate the incidents overseas. Investigators came to believe that the injuries to victims’ brains were caused by a microwave weapon, which could be beamed at its target through walls and windows, and could even be effective from a couple miles away. Given the work Polymeropoulos and his team had been doing to thwart the Russians since 2017, and the fact that much of the scientific literature on the biological effects of microwaves had been published in the Soviet Union and Russia, it seemed plausible to the investigators that the Russians could be behind this.

The most compelling evidence, however, came from publicly available data. As has been widely **reported**, mobile phones track people's movements, and location-data companies accumulate this information and sell it. Using this sort of data, CIA investigators were able to deduce the whereabouts of Russian agents, and place them in close physical proximity to the CIA officers at the time they had been attacked when they were in Poland, Georgia, Australia, and Taiwan. In each case, individuals believed to be FSB agents were within range of the CIA officers who had been hit in 2019. In two of the incidents, location data apparently showed FSB agents in the same hotel at the same time their targets experienced the onset of symptoms.

When I asked Polymeropoulos about the CIA investigation, he said that it was conducted after he retired and that, because he did not have direct knowledge of it, he could not comment on it. He did say, however, that it would not be difficult to use the same techniques, analyzing publicly available data, that had been used by organizations like Bellingcat, which have employed similar methods to expose Russian operations in Europe. "Anyone can buy the cell-phone data on the open market, and you can see where people went," Polymeropoulos explained. "And perhaps the reason why it seems to have worked is because, just like you saw with all of the **GRU activities**, they're **sloppy**." GRU machinations were discovered because officers had made several embarrassing missteps, like **leaving behind taxi receipts** that showed their starting address as GRU headquarters. In the case of the microwave attacks, it seemed FSB operatives had brought their phones with them while carrying out their missions—typically a no-no in the world of covert operations. "There's ways intelligence officers cover their tracks," Polymeropoulos marveled. "If I'm going off to do something like that, I'm not taking my phone. It's insane. It's so sloppy."

(Asked for comment about the CIA investigation linking Russian security services to the attacks on CIA officers, Maria Zakharova, a spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, said, "I will not try to confirm whether they are the victims of 'an acoustic attack,' paranoia, or Russophobia. That's a question for the doctors.")

According to people familiar with the investigation, the geolocation data did not provide a slam dunk, but made a good circumstantial case that could link the Russian government to the apparent attacks on CIA officers. It was a starting point, a lead that some people aware of the investigation hoped Agency leaders would pick up on and continue to probe. They would soon be deeply disappointed.

The attacks on CIA officers infuriated people in the Agency. “There’s a gentlemen’s agreement not to do these things,” Polymeropoulos explained. “There’s never any physical stuff.” (When I asked him if the CIA had ever physically hurt Russians when he was running EEMC, Polymeropoulos was adamant, saying, “We never harm other officials like that. It’s counterproductive.”) But the Russian government was clearly feeling more emboldened. “They know that our president is at war with our intelligence community, so kick them when they’re down, get back at them for everything they’ve done before,” the former national security official told me. “It’s a kick in the balls, isn’t it?” Whatever punishment Washington had meted out for, say, meddling in the 2016 election was clearly not deterring the Russians. “The Russians have factored all this in,” the former national security official said. “They don’t care about sanctions.” As a result, the Russians seemed to be going further than ever. In 2019, according to two sources, Russian operatives even slipped date-rape drugs into the drinks of an undercover CIA officer at a diplomatic reception.

On December 23, 2019, the CIA team investigating the attacks brought its findings to CIA director Gina Haspel. According to two sources, after listening to the investigators lay out their evidence that suggested the Russian security services were behind the hits on Agency personnel, Haspel challenged them. They say she accused the investigators of both hiding information from her and lying to her about what their inquiry uncovered. The sources say that the director questioned the motives of those looking into the mysterious attacks. “This is why we need to clean out Russia House,” she said, referring to the CIA’s operations unit focused on Russia, according to two sources. “You’re just trying to stir up trouble on Russia.” A third source confirmed that “the meeting did not go well.”

One possible explanation for such a reaction from Haspel is that she did not find the intelligence convincing. In a statement to *GQ*, Brittany Bramell, the director of public affairs at the Agency, said, “If there was credible intelligence that showed an adversary purposefully harmed a CIA officer, you can bet Director Haspel would act swiftly and decisively.”

But the other explanation for dismissing the conclusions of the investigative team is more troubling. According to [reporting](#) in Politico, Haspel has seemed to be reluctant with what information on Russia she brings to the White House, given President Trump’s

obstinate lack of willingness to condemn Vladimir Putin or Russian attacks in any way. “No one’s going to brief anything on Russia to the president,” Polymeropoulos told me. “They’re terrified of doing that. I know that from the briefers. Because he’ll explode and the whole thing will get derailed, because he has this weird affinity for Putin.” Asked why Putin remains such an untouchable subject for the American president, the former national security official said, “He doesn’t want to be embarrassed in front of Putin, that’s part of the dilemma. He wants Putin to like him. Just look at how he behaves with the Queen. That’s how he behaves with everyone who has any glamour and cachet.” Moreover, the former official added, “Putin has everything he doesn’t have.”

There are some at Langley who regard Haspel's motives as noble, if shortsighted. In their view, she may be engaged in an effort to protect the agency, even at the cost of not protecting individual CIA employees. According to two sources, Haspel was worried that, if she upset Trump too often by boxing him in with more news of alleged Russian malfeasance that he’d be asked to condemn publicly, he would gut the CIA—which he already distrusts—just like he did with [the State Department](#). And though Polymeropoulos told me that Haspel “hates the Russians,” she is hamstrung by the fact that Russia has become such an explosive issue in American domestic politics. One former CIA official quipped that “a good day for Gina is when we don’t talk about Russia.” Haspel apparently sees herself as someone who can steer the CIA ship through the stormy waters of the Trump era, at least until a new administration can calm the waters. She is, after all, very much a creature of the Agency; she started her career as a clandestine operative and [even headed](#) Russia House for a time. Sources familiar with her thinking say she warns that if the CIA pushes Trump too hard on Russia, he will replace her with someone like Senator Tom Cotton, a Trump loyalist—and an outsider.

Whatever her logic, according to two sources familiar with the situation, Haspel has yet to take the evidence of Russian involvement in the attacks to President Trump.

Nearly three years after that terrifying night in the Moscow Marriott, Polymeropoulos’s constant migraines have still not abated. Botox, plasma, steroid injections, visits to a chiropractor—nothing has helped, and painkillers don’t seem to touch it. He is enrolled in an NIH study for which, once a year, he is hooked up to an elaborate machine that spins him around to test his balance. It takes him days to recover

from the nausea and dizziness it triggers.

He's not alone. Smith, of the University of Pennsylvania, told me that "the good news is that everyone improved and many people's symptoms resolved." Yet many of the State Department staffers affected in Cuba and China are still disabled. Some are wheelchair-bound; others have to wear weighted vests for the rest of their lives to correct their balance. Many have had to retire prematurely.

Polymeropoulos says the CIA still refuses to send him to Walter Reed for medical treatment, but according to a source on the Hill working with affected diplomats, the State Department and Department of Commerce have treated their employees far worse than the Agency has. "These employees were struggling not only with their injuries, but they were ostracized and some were even reprimanded for saying they were sick," says New Hampshire Senator Jeanne Shaheen. In 2018, she was approached by a constituent who had been hit in China. Since then, Shaheen and her staff have become unofficial case workers for dozens of diplomats and trade officers affected by the Havana Syndrome in Cuba and China. "There has been very little progress, from what I've seen," Shaheen says. "Sadly, it sometimes seems like those tasked with unearthing the truth of the matter are more concerned with limiting the patients' understanding of their own ailments and burying the issue." Shaheen is also aware of similar attacks on Americans on American soil, but says she doesn't know of anything that's being done to counter that threat.

In the meantime, according to several sources on Capitol Hill and at the CIA, the National Academy of Sciences has completed a report, commissioned by the State Department, assessing the potential causes of the Havana Syndrome. The report, now under review at State, apparently reached many of the same conclusions that Smith and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania did. David Relman, a Stanford immunologist and microbiologist who chaired the Academy's committee on investigating the Havana Syndrome, told me that he is deeply frustrated that their report still has not been made public. He says it "describes distinct clinical findings and plausible mechanisms" responsible for the injuries, and that the "American people, and their elected representatives, deserve to read what we have found."

Smith's ongoing research has offered new insights into the Havana Syndrome—if little encouraging news for those suffering from it. In 2019, Smith and his team published [a follow-up study](#) that used advanced neuroimaging and brain-connectivity studies to look

at the brains of diplomats hit in Havana. This technique showed what less sophisticated imaging had missed. The patients' brain connectivity was severely affected, especially in the cerebellum and brain networks that control auditory and visuospatial functions. Their volumes of white matter—the inner, deeper part of the brain—were significantly reduced. White matter is made up of axons, the delicate wiring of the central nervous system. According to Smith, it was the axons and their carefully arranged structure that were damaged in people suffering from the syndrome. “If the axons break, that’s it,” he told me. “They won’t reconnect. And you’re not going to grow new axons. You only have the ones you’re born with.” The brain can learn to make up for and work around some of the damage, Smith says, but that takes time and the compensatory mechanisms are often far from perfect.

Is it so farfetched to imagine that the Russian government is inflicting potentially permanent brain damage on U.S. government personnel? “In general, the Russians have no compunction about doing this kind of thing,” says John Sipher, who was a clandestine CIA officer in Russia and was deputy director of Russia House during George W. Bush’s presidency. “They don’t give a shit,” he says, about physically harming American officers. He and other CIA veterans pointed to **reports** of the KGB bathing the American embassy in Moscow in microwaves for decades during the Cold War, as well as **other intelligence tricks** that potentially compromised the health of American diplomats and spies. He says he remembers the Russian security services zapping him and his colleagues in Moscow with radiation to see if they were carrying electronic equipment. The CIA officers all joked about their testicles and the potential health consequences, but as far as Sipher could tell, none of it was done to deliberately cause injury. Whatever health effects occurred seemed like unintentional collateral damage. If the Russians were now targeting U.S. personnel to knowingly cause brain damage, “this is definitely an escalation,” Sipher says. “It’s the asymmetrical way of doing things. You push until you get pushback.”

This is a fairly accurate assessment of how the Russian government operates abroad, especially under Vladimir Putin’s leadership. Historically, he has kept pushing the boundaries until he’s met resistance, though in recent years, he has become far more brazen. Neither sanctions nor **the expulsion** of Russian diplomats from the United States and other Western countries for deploying the nerve agent Novichok against former Russian spy Sergei Skripal on British soil seems to have made much of a difference. Last summer, a man was assassinated in a Berlin park in broad daylight, an attack the German government **blamed** on Moscow. In August, Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny

was **poisoned** with Novichok in Siberia. And there is no sense that the Russians are letting up: This year, the American intelligence community **announced** that Russia was again interfering in the presidential election with the aim of helping reelect Donald Trump.

American foreign policy specialists who want to reinvent the U.S.-Russia relationship can't quite understand why the Russian security services are still doing this—other than because they can, and because, with Trump in office, they will most certainly get away with it. “They create the reason to keep fighting with them,” says the former national security official about the Russian government. “We don't even know why they're doing this. We don't even want anything from each other anymore, other than an arms-control agreement. We have to kind of push back, we have to do that, but we also have to find a way of living together too.” Yet the Russians, the former official explains, “can't get used to the fact that we've moved on. They want to pull us back into the fight again—the question is for what? This is what we kept telling [Russian officials], that if you want to have a relationship of equals and get stuff done, knock this other crap off.”

Until recently, the details of the CIA investigation that links Russian intelligence services to the attacks have been tightly held at Langley. Earlier this month, according to three sources, the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence asked for and received a briefing on the matter from the CIA. “The Committee has long-standing concern related to whether foreign adversaries might be seeking to do harm to Americans abroad, particularly the men and women of the intelligence community who often toil in shadows with no public recognition of their many sacrifices,” said Chairman Adam Schiff in a statement to *GQ*. “We have conducted, and will continue to conduct, rigorous oversight to ensure the health and safety of all intelligence community personnel.” But Schiff and his staff declined to comment on whether a briefing had even happened, let alone on its substance. It is not clear if information from the December 2019 briefing to the NSC ever made it to the president, and the White House has not been briefed since.

The secrecy ensures that Russia suffers no consequences for its actions, and the impunity may motivate Russian security services to carry out more attacks. This has caused growing anger at the CIA, that neither their director nor the commander in chief seems willing to protect them or American civilians. This is why intelligence officials leaked the **information about Russian bounties on American troops in Afghanistan** to the press, and it was the stated motivation of my sources in revealing the highly sensitive information

they possessed on the microwave attacks. They felt they had no other recourse. It was also another way to continue the work Polymeropoulos did at the EEMC: expose what he thinks are Russian covert operations with the aim of thwarting them.

The fact that the Agency has not aggressively pursued the investigation or gone after the people involved infuriates Polymeropoulos too. “If there was an al-Qaeda threat against our officers, we would do everything possible to shut it down, but also to catch the people involved,” Polymeropoulos told me. “I don’t see any of that happening here. What I would have expected would be this full court press that, you know, if we have senior people traveling and you think the Russians are going to hit him, have teams ready to try to capture” the people carrying out the attacks. As far as Polymeropoulos knew, the Agency wasn’t doing this—or even sending a private, high-level message to their Russian counterparts warning them to stop. The fact that the CIA still wasn’t doing any of this was damning, in Polymeropoulos’s eyes.

But Polymeropoulos is largely reluctant to criticize the agency he still loves. He is clearly nostalgic for his time there, and when we met this summer, we escaped the heat into the carpeted cool of his suburban basement, where he proudly showed me his medals, souvenirs, and photographs from his many exploits in the Middle East. He is careful to separate the Agency from the Office of Medical Services, and even then he makes a point of defending the younger doctors, who, he says, were very kind and empathetic. When I pressed him on whether he was angry at the Agency, he grew philosophical. “Look, it’s incredible I was never killed in Afghanistan or Iraq,” Polymeropoulos told me. “I’m not mad at the Russians. At the end of the day, we have a lot of adversaries, and you kind of chalk it up to that. I am more looking for what doctor’s going to help me stop having these goddamn headaches.”

Julia Ioffe is a GQ correspondent.

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