

The ‘Merchant of Death’ detained in Thailand

BAD AND GOOD ABOUT VICTOR BOUT

By David Dastych

Warsaw, Poland: In a rare interview granted in Moscow to an American journalist, filmmaker and writer, [Peter Landesman](#), in 2003, Victor Anatolyevich Bout (then 36) said about himself: "I woke up after Sept. 11 and found I was second only to Osama." And referring to his bad reputation of "the biggest arms dealer in the world" he joked: "Maybe I should start an arms-trafficking university and teach a course on U.N. sanctions busting." Four years later, caught in Bangkok on Thursday, March 6, 2008 in an almost model DEA sting operation, Bout got his first chance to "lecture" to his captors on how he had built an almost perfect, very sophisticated and dangerous global arms trade system. But he kept his mouth shut. Victor Bout is facing a trial in Thailand and, perhaps, an extradition to the United States where he could get even 15 years in jail. A Thai court has denied him bail "because it fears he may try to leave the country." Bout, 41, hopes he will be sent back to Russia to be tried there, and his Russian lawyers are working very hard on his extradition to Moscow. It's still too early to predict what will happen to the very unique and highly intelligent Russian weapon-trade master. American media had reported Bout could embarrass the U.S.

Government if put on trial. A part of his large (over 60 planes) worldwide air-transport network was recently employed by the Pentagon and probably also by the CIA as a logistic "subcontractor" in Iraq and Afghanistan. The secret character of some of these missions shouldn't be revealed. If allowed to return to Russia, Bout could face a trial there, too, but he would be well protected from extradition for similar reasons: his enterprises had been rendering very important services to the Russian industrial-military complex and to the highest bosses in the Kremlin, including the former President, Vladimir Putin. Would Putin's successor, Dmitri Medvedev, keep Victor Bout as his own "junkyard dog" for special ops? Not sure. Russia is strenuously trying to build up its credibility of a "lawful state." For many years, characters like Semyon Mogilevich, "The Brainy Don", have served the Kremlin masters as middlemen and operators of illegal businesses. Mogilevich has been recently arrested in Moscow for "tax evasion" and is awaiting a probable trial. But he won't be extradited to the United States, in spite of the fact that he is high on the FBI "wanted" list. A similar option could be "arranged" for Bout in Russia, with a slight difference: Mogilevich is a Jew and Jews in Russia are not treated well and they could easily loose state protection (like in the case of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a former KGB protege, now a prisoner). Victor Anatolyevich Bout is a genuine Russian national and his case could be treated more favorably for him.

The crazy Yeltsin years

I had first heard of Victor Bout in the early 1990's, when I cooperated with a Polish private air-services company named Joy Co.Ltd (its name alluding to "the joy of flying"). Joy had its main base in Djibouti, in eastern Africa, and the company was rapidly expanding on the continent. They were also selling Russian helicopters and other planes gotten from their good contacts in Moscow and Kiev. Some time in 1992, they were planning a special operation: to fly our choppers to a flooded African

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country and to evacuate some gold from a gold mine for a pretty good sum of money. Short before that venture, the chief pilots and managers of Joy Co. Ltd perished in a strange helicopter crash over east-African desert. Before the accident, Joy ran into a strong Russian competition, dumping prices to their African customers. After the funeral of our pilots, I heard somebody talk about "but" (this word means "a shoe" in Polish). Had Victor Bout anything in common with that African accident? I simply don't know. What I know is that in Africa Bout's arms traders accepted payments in gold and diamonds. Joy Co.Ltd, a small, not well funded Polish air-services company had no chances to compete against Victor Bout's lavishly financed network. As he told Landesman about his beginnings in the early 1990's:

"I never had investors," Bout said. But where does a 25-year-old Russian get that kind of start-up money? I asked. "It was never difficult finding money," he said, refusing to say more."

In the "crazy Yeltsin years", as we used to call the 1990's, everything was possible. Russia opened up with all rare materials and products that could have been considered strategic and top secret by the Soviets. There are some unconfirmed hints that Victor Bout also shipped nuclear materials from Russia and the Ukraine to (mostly) false "end users" in Central Africa, covering the real buyers: Iraq, Libya, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. One of the three Russian transport planes, starting from military airfields near Kiev, Ukraine, and loaded with weapons and nuclear stuff crashed over Greece. The destination was Central African Republic, the caretakers were Russian and French intelligence officers and the value of only one of several 30 kg metal flasks with special nuclear product was about 10 million dollars. The planes allegedly belonged to one of Bout's African air companies. I have learned about this unfortunate flight in Paris from some intel friends.

In the first part of the 1990's, I cooperated with a Czech trade and financial enterprise, but truly a KGB "front company", which had its residents in Geneva, Switzerland. They traded in...Russian Rubles, trillions of them to be exchanged against U.S. dollars. The overall contract was worth over USD 5.0 billion. The Czech company's share was to be USD 100 million and my "tiny" fee was worth USD 1 million only. The contracts have been arranged by operators of a so called "Vienna Group" (a business-mafia outfit run by the KGB) with some Kremlin "big shots" or "fat cats," who controlled the Moscow and provincial national banks. The other party was, as I learned later, the CIA with their "front companies" and their Texan bank connections. And it has failed. Why? Because some of the "fat cats" had been suddenly replaced within the Yeltsin's administration and they lost the "blocking" controls over the banks. At that time, waiting in Geneva, I didn't know that the main operator on the American side was a former "junkyard dog", or a special ops intelligence man of President Ronald Reagan, Somalia's Ambassador to Canada, Lee "Leo" Emil Wanta. That covert business genius and American intelligence officer was the "brain" of a huge network of operations that were to crush the Soviet economy in the late 1980's and early 1990's. One of them was known as a "Ruble Pump". Wanta was also instrumental in shutting down of some illegal nuclear trade operations and Dr. Lutz's lab serving them in Switzerland. But when he got ready to "take off" Marc Rich, a mafia-type American businessman, later pardoned by President Bill Clinton, he was suddenly arrested and flown to the U.S.A. to face bogus "tax evasion" charges in the State of Wisconsin. When I got in touch with Lee,

several years later, he told me that if I could have met him in Geneva in the 1990's, our dollar-ruble exchange with the Russians would be successful. I didn't know either, that the real cause of his arrest in Switzerland and his later terrible plight in the U.S.A. was his flat refusal to transfer \$ 250 million from CIA secret accounts under his control to a private foundation owned by President's wife, now a Senator and a Presidential candidate, Mrs. Hillary Rodham Clinton. Ambassador Wanta is still fighting in U.S. courts to return these secret funds to the American People, and not to some greedy politicians who would be glad to steal more them... Read more: "What Is the Truth about Leo Wanta?" [Geoff Metcalf](#), Monday, Sept. 18, 2006 or [Idaho Observer](#), January 2007, "Following the money backwards leads to President Reagan, Russian rubles and Ambassador Leo Wanta."

What all this has in common with Victor Bout? There were many connections between the rise of the secret business operations by the American intelligence (CIA in particular) and the rise of similar operations conducted by the Soviet KGB in the 1990's. Lee Emil Wanta was Reagan's "junkyard dog", and Victor Anatolyevich Bout was Yeltsin Family's one. Bout had more of good luck than Wanta...until his recent arrest in Thailand. Lee is out of jail and fighting for a noble cause, Victor is facing long-time imprisonment, unless his high Kremlin protectors help him out of the hell-hole.

The wildlife lover

The cases like Bout's always remind me about human's dual nature: bad and good, loving and hating, normal and perverse, because every man and every woman has been naturally doted with conflicting features of character. And only God knows why and what for.

[Peter Landesman](#), in his brilliant article for the New York Times Magazine (2003), quoted Bout's close associate Richard Chichakli about Victor:

"Flowers, that's where it all started." ... "He's a vegetarian." ... "He's an ecologist. He believes in saving the rain forest." ... "He admired the isolated Pygmy tribes he visited during his jungle runs, he said, because they lived in perfect harmony with their environment, immune from conflict and diseases like AIDS."

And more, about and from Bout himself:

"Over the previous 10 years, he explained, whenever he accompanied one of his planes into the remote jungles of Africa, he spent time photographing wildlife and studying isolated African tribes. "In the middle of nowhere, you feel alive, you feel part of nature." His favorite authors, he told me, were the New Age novelists Paulo Coelho and Carlos Castaneda. "What I really want to do now is to take one of my helicopters to the Russian Arctic north and make wildlife films for National Geographic and the Discovery channel."

Gayle Smith, the U.S. National Security Council's top Africanist, quoted by Landesman, said:

"Bout was brilliant,"... "Had he been dealing in legal commodities, he would have been considered one of the world's greatest businessmen. He's a fascinating but destructive character. We were trying to bring peace, and Bout was bringing war."

A dog of war, gunrunner, former Air Force officer and KGB spy...A husband, father, ecologist, exceptionally literate and highly intelligent businessman with fluent command of six foreign languages, including Farsi and some African, [Bout is said](#) to have at least five passports and several aliases. He resided in Russia with his wife, Alla, and her father, "Zuiguin." According to a UN report, "information from the United States suggests that his wife's father, "Zuiguin," at one point held a high position in the KGB, perhaps even as high as a Deputy Chairman."

In addition to his services as an arms dealer and importer/exporter of weapons and ammunition, Viktor Bout has allegedly offered some sort of private military assistance to the Afghan Northern Alliance and United States in those countries' on-going war on terrorism. According to journalists Stephen Braun and Douglas Farah, Bout approached the American intelligence community (specifically the FBI, possibly the CIA as well) sometime after the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center with a contract of services to help combat the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. While the American agencies have not disclosed their final decision on the matter, documentation has been obtained by [Braun and Farah](#) which indicated that these agencies were interested enough to allow Bout to fly to the United States on at least two occasions for face-to-face discussions of his sales pitch. (It is important to note that trips of this nature would have required a temporary waiver of his American travel ban, evidence of which Braun and Farah also claim to have obtained.)

Bout was arrested in Bangkok following an eight months long international sting operation, staged against him and his aide, Andrew Smulian, by the American [Drug Enforcement Administration \(DEA\)](#). At least three people knowing him or cooperating with him helped the DEA as covert informants, code-named C-1, C-2 and C-3, who played the roles of Columbian FARC rebels, looking for weapons worth over \$ 30 million. The DEA sting operation extended from Curacao to Bucharest and Bangkok and led to the arrest of Bout and Smulian and to presenting well-documented and serious [charges](#) against "international arms traffickers" to a U.S. Court in the Southern District of New York.

I wonder what will happen to Victor Bout in the future. Will he rot in jail or become a "turncoat" to help the international efforts to curb illegal trafficking of arms, drugs, nuclear materials and other items what render our world dangerous. Is this possible? All is.

David Dastych, 67, is a veteran journalist who served both in the Polish intelligence and the CIA; jailed in Poland by the Communist regime he spent several years in special prison wards; released in early 1990's he joined international efforts to monitor illegal nuclear trade in Europe and Asia; handicapped for lifetime in a mountain accident in France, in 1994; now he has returned to active life and runs his own media agency in Warsaw.

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