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# CURRENT BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTEWORTHY NONFICTION

## Frustrated Spy Catchers

Reviewed by John Prados

THE TWO AMERICANS WHO TOOK PART in writing *Spies* pose the essential question in the first sentence of their preface: "Is there anything new to be learned about Soviet espionage in America?" They answer in the affirmative, of course. But the question needs qualification, because John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Russian coauthor Alexander Vassiliev write only about the earliest part of the story, primarily before the Cold War, with some brief coverage of the late 1940s. This era has been endlessly picked over already, not least by the authors themselves. There *is* a huge story, yet to be told in a coherent fashion, of Soviet espionage during the Cold War. It is a story of secrets purloined, agents recruited—not just Americans but Western Europeans and others—and of Moscow's spy chieftains, their aims, their management of field officers, and their role in the collapse of the Soviet Union. *Spies* is not that story. Rather, the authors delve into the pre-World War II and wartime exploits of the Soviet spymasters assisted by members of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA).

This terrain is all too familiar. Some of the episodes, such as the debate over the alleged treason of State Department official Alger

Hiss, or the "atomic spy" cases epitomized by that of Julius Rosenberg, became political litmus tests for generations of Americans. Ideological camps formed over guilt or innocence.

Political careers were built on the investigations. Naming names of alleged or real spies became the stuff of parlor games—and witch-hunts. Indeed, the exercise added the term "redbaiting" to the American lexicon. Soviet spymasters must have enjoyed this spectacle of the capitalist dog eating its tail. It was probably their greatest achievement.

To understand how *Spies'* authors could claim to bring new information to the table requires some discussion of evidence. There are three main veins of material on this subject. One, the "old" evidence, consists of contemporary accounts from the era, including media coverage, the memoirs of confessed agents and a few Soviet defectors, the testimony and conclusions of congressional hearings and certain trials and investigations—most notably those of Hiss and J. Robert Oppenheimer—and scholarly studies of the

### SPIES:

The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America.

By John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Alexander Vassiliev. Yale Univ. Press. 650 pp. \$35



Alexander Vassiliev, a former KGB officer turned journalist, recorded his research in Russian intelligence archives in the mid-1990s in eight notebooks. The page above sketches the KGB's 1945 scientific and technical agent network and describes Julius Rosenberg's espionage circle.

CPUSA. This vein has been mined deeply since at least 1955, when David J. Dallin published his (still useful) work *Soviet Espionage*.

The second vein dates from the mid-1990s, when the National Security Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency began the release of several thousand Soviet messages, bearing the code name “Venona,” that had been intercepted and fully or partially decrypted by U.S. intelligence. The most recent of these messages dates from 1948, and the bulk were sent during World War II. In addition, a range of FBI documents on the Soviet spy cases

have been declassified. These materials fueled numerous studies, including ones by Haynes, a historian at the Library of Congress, and Klehr, a politics and history professor at Emory University.

The third vein of material is based on internal records of the Soviet civilian intelligence service, which has had various names but—following the authors’ own convention—will here be called the KGB. These records were made available from early 1994 to early 1996 to Alexander Vassiliev, a former KGB officer turned journalist, through an arrangement with American publishers. Vassiliev teamed with American historian Allen Weinstein to write *The Haunted Wood*, published in 1999. As the dates indicate, Vassiliev and Weinstein already had access to the Venona material. The symbiosis between the KGB records and the Venona material gave *The Haunted Wood* much of its impact.

The clear comparison is thus between that book and Vassiliev’s new work in conjunction with Haynes and Klehr.

It is important to understand that the three veins of material, however rich, are inherently limited. In the case of the KGB records, Vassiliev was only permitted to take notes, not reproduce documents, at a location remote from the KGB archives, using materials selected by Russian intelligence officials. The officers who headed the post-Soviet intelligence service (SVR) directorates for “illegals”—that is, undercover officers—and scien-

tific spying denied all requests. Vassiliev and Weinstein could ask for things, but the Russians could deny them at whim—and in the middle of this collaboration, an incident that embarrassed the Russians involving a document unearthed by a researcher at a different archive, plus generally deteriorating U.S.-Russian relations, halted the entire process. Access to the KGB records was never renewed.

These facts raise a number of questions regarding the source material, which we will simply assume was itself authentic. The SVR managed the access; it presumably had motives and a certain image it wished to convey. The KGB filing system was inconsistent—which, Vassiliev writes in *Spies*, sometimes played in his favor—but there is no telling what was missed thereby. The SVR specifically denied him the files on spy recruiter Julius Rosenberg and New Deal Treasury Department official Harry Dexter White—two of the major characters in this story—limiting Vassiliev to what he could cull from cross-references in other files, rich as they might be. Note taking, as opposed to photocopying, meant that only those aspects that appeared significant to Vassiliev at the moment, as he hurried through the documents, were captured, and termination of access meant that no one could go back to check or extend the research. Klehr and Haynes note additional limitations in their preface to *Spies*. They conclude, correctly, that the Vassiliev material is nevertheless the largest available compilation of KGB material. Still, historians' cautious attitude toward this evidence is understandable.

The key difference, we are told, between the new book and the earlier Weinstein-Vassiliev collaboration is that the authors now have available the full Vassiliev notebooks rather than extracts that Vassiliev took with him when he moved from Russia to England in 1996. Fearful that his notebooks would be confiscated at the airport, he left them behind but has since retrieved them. This access is certainly an improvement, but it does not escape the limitations of the original research.

Meanwhile, the use of FBI files is hampered by widespread and often extensive deletions. As a source, Venona has its own imperfections, starting

with the limited number of messages intercepted and its restricted time frame. In those messages the KGB referred to individuals, places, and subjects by code name (cryptonym). This spawned a guessing game about who is who and what is what among intelligence officials and, since the declassification of Venona, among historians and other observers. Haynes has been a notable contributor to this cottage industry. Haynes and Klehr published a book on Soviet intelligence in the United States based on Venona at the same time Weinstein and Vassiliev brought out *The Haunted Wood*. In that book, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America*, they contrived to identify 349 agents for the Soviets.

Which brings the discussion to *Spies*. The book opens with a chapter that seeks to prove beyond doubt that Hiss was a Soviet spy, adding the Vassiliev notebooks to previous evidence. That was also the contention of *The Haunted Wood*. In the decade since the earlier book's publication, arguments have raged about Hiss, with disputes over cryptonyms said to refer to him, complicated by the fact that Hiss is said to have spied for Soviet military intelligence, not the KGB. The argumentation approaches the minute detail of Talmudic scholarship, a level that persists through this long work.

*Spies* goes on to cover a great deal of ground, including spying efforts related to the atomic bomb project, Soviet recruitment of journalists, spies who infiltrated the U.S. government, agents recruited from the American wartime intelligence organization (the Office of Strategic Services [OSS]), scientific and technical espionage, support personnel (read CPUSA), and celebrity spies such as businessman Victor Hammer. Among the highlights are claims that the journalist I. F. Stone did indeed work for the Soviets in the 1930s; the identification of a (minor) new atomic spy, engineer Russell McNutt; a concession that Oppenheimer (whatever his sympathies may have been) was not a spy but merely an object of KGB desires; and an assertion that Ernest Hemingway “toyed with Soviet intelligence.” The book ends by raising the ante on the

number of Soviet spies: There may have been in excess of 500.

Despite all this detail, the story that really emerges is one of KGB failure. Consider the case of the OSS: This American intelligence agency created the foundation for what is now the CIA. The authors argue that the KGB developed “an astounding number of sources” within the OSS—they identify a dozen. By this standard, the CIA ought to have been riddled with Soviet spies from its inception in 1947. Yet it was the 1960s before the agency was afflicted by a mole hunt for KGB agents—now thought to have been spurious—and the 1980s until significant KGB penetrations of the CIA were actually uncovered. Similarly, the signal KGB success of World War II—uncovering American atomic secrets—was not matched by any consequential espionage presence in the United States’ Cold War—era nuclear programs. For all the naming of names, the Soviets took home no secrets they had not gained in World War II or before it. The balance of power in the Cold War remained exactly what it had been then.

During the 1930s, when the Soviet social enterprise still seemed attractive, the democracies appeared to be threatened by fascism, and the impending conflict was epitomized, for many, by the Spanish Civil War, recruits for the Soviet

spymasters were legion. Most of the relationships detailed in *Spies* date from that period. Joseph Stalin’s purges, which also cut deeply into the KGB, affected management of its American networks. His 1939 deal with Adolf Hitler soured the pot. The rising disaffection and Soviet paranoia led the KGB, before the end of World War II, to actively work to cut the CPUSA out of its spy operations. A series of spy cases that began in 1945 with the defection of a KGB operative in Canada and the surrender of a CPUSA cutout to the FBI completed the destruction. The controversial Hiss and Oppenheimer cases took their public toll at a moment when KGB espionage in the United States was near its nadir.

These observations are not so new. And the interpretations of individuals’ roles in *Spies* are different mostly in nuance from what has appeared already. Material on the actual Soviet intelligence gains from all this espionage remains sparse, with the exception of the activities of the atomic spies. So I wonder about the value of this book. The number of spies has swelled from 349 to 500? This is angels on the heads of pins. It is time to stop bogging down in the Stalinist era and move on into the Cold War.

JOHN PRADOS is a senior fellow of the National Security Archive. His most recent book is *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975*, published earlier this year.

## Rubber Baron

Reviewed by Paul Maliszewski

IN JULY 1925, HARVEY FIRESTONE, THE founder of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, traveled to Dearborn, Michigan, to have lunch with his friend Henry Ford. Firestone wanted the automaker to ally with him against the European rubber monopoly. Winston Churchill, then secretary of state for Great Britain’s colonies, had established a cartel to control production and sustain a higher price. Rubber was running \$1.21 per pound in the

United States, up from 20 cents three years before. But Ford, then in his early sixties and independent to the point of being isolated, saw no benefit in a partnership with Firestone. After their meal, he instructed his personal secretary, “Find out where is the best place to grow rubber?”

**FORDLANDIA:**  
The Rise and Fall  
of Henry Ford’s  
Forgotten  
Jungle City.

By Greg Grandin.  
*Metropolitan.*  
416 pp. \$27.50