



Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America

John Earl Haynes , Harvey Klehr , Alexander Vassiliev

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This stunning book, based on KGB archives that have never come to light before, provides the most complete account of Soviet espionage in America ever written. In 1993, former KGB officer Alexander Vassiliev was permitted unique access to Stalin-era records of Soviet intelligence operations against the United States. Years later, living in Britain, Vassiliev retrieved his extensive notebooks of transcribed documents from Moscow. With these notebooks John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr have meticulously constructed a new, sometimes shocking, historical account.

Along with general insights into espionage tactics and the motives of Americans who spied for Stalin, *Spies* resolves specific, long-seething controversies. The book confirms, among many other things, that Alger Hiss cooperated with Soviet intelligence over a long period of years, that journalist I. F. Stone worked on behalf of the KGB in the 1930s, and that Robert Oppenheimer was never recruited by Soviet intelligence. *Spies* also uncovers numerous American spies who were never even under suspicion and satisfyingly identifies the last unaccounted for American nuclear spies. Vassiliev tells the story of the notebooks and his own extraordinary life in a gripping introduction to the volume.

Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America Details

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Jeremy says

What a fun book, I read it like a thriller. I always saw this generation's focus on the communist witch hunt as awkward. Yes, everything about me hates the idea of accusing people who have no way of defending themselves. I in general don't like any sort of conspiracy theories or idea that someone out there is trying to do us harm. But I always wondered if it was the witch hunts that made sure this country never became a communist country. What if they spent all this energy preventing a problem and when it was over, everyone said, "why did you get so worked up."

This book is exactly that. The soviet union had a very strong interest in spying on the united states and turning the the USA into a communist country. And they were much better at spying on us than we were at them. They also did a great job of getting the American communist party to do the work for them. All those people, like the Rosenbergs and Alger Hiss, who people said were victims of a witch hunt, really were spies. I still don't know if it justifies our response, but it changes the conversation, and it definitely makes me rethink McCarthyism.

Nick says

A curious Guardian article on Hemingway as a failed KGB agent.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/jul/09/hemingway-failed-kgb-spy?>

Socraticgadfly says

Early Soviet spying in the United States was more than Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers. More than the Rosenbergs and David Greenglass. More than Klaus Fuchs.

The duo of American authors, relying largely on Vassilev's near-exhaustive research, show just how extensive this spying was in the 1930s and 40s, some of the areas it penetrated besides the Manhattan Project and more.

If you ever doubted the snooping of Hiss, or Harry Dexter White, this book goes even deeper than Venona. If you want to learn a bit about the amount of military espionage Julius Rosenberg and some fellow engineering recruits did, it's here.

At the same time, the book has a few issues.

One is the subhead. No, the KGB did not "fall," at least not permanently. And, some of its successes in the 1960s and later were almost as big as in the 1940s.

Second, the material in this book gets a bit numbing at times with real names and KGB handles intertwined and other things without more organization. In short, it reads like one of its authors is a librarian with the

Library of Congress.

I would have written this much differently. Throw out a full chapter devoted to Hiss. He's guilty, and you're not going to convince any fellow travelers otherwise. Rather, make an opening chapter a chronological one, starting with the work of Amtorg before the US diplomatically recognized the USSR. Then a chapter on Manhattan Project spying. Then, a chapter on non-Manhattan military espionage. Then, one on non-military industrial espionage, as in the XY line. Then one on government spies, dropping Hiss in here. Combine the "couriers/support" chapter with more on how the CPUSA was involved. And, in the conclusion, without going into too many details, note how the KGB would go on to "rise" again, and why.

In other words, this is a good book. But, primarily due to poor writing and editing, it falls a fair degree short of being a great one.

haetmonger says

wasn't my bag, mostly.

Jeremy says

Incredibly comprehensive and dense. Not a light read. But, using a variety of pre-existing writings (eg, autobiographies, Venona decrypts, congressional hearings) and the new material brought to light by the access granted to Alexander Vassiliev to Russian archives, the book seeks to methodologically establish the penetration of American government and society by Russian spies. In some instances, the new evidence alleges to put to rest lingering questions about who was a spy, and who wasn't. Fascinating (if cumbersome) walk-through of Russian penetration of the US categorized by types such as Manhattan Project, American journalists, American government (eg, State, OSS), and other spies. Well-researched and documented. Not the easiest book to read.

Jan Notzon says

The title is more than sufficient to tell you what it is about, and what it is about is absolutely astonishing. This book's content is authenticated by the third author, who was a KGB operative and is cross-referenced by the Venona decrypts, FBI files, among others.

What is most astounding is the difference between the facts of Soviet espionage and the popular belief formed chiefly by the media, i.e. that these Soviet informants were really the victims of unconscionable persecution and were absolutely innocent. Most distressing, that espionage unleashed the Korean war and the deaths of millions of people. It probably also facilitated the establishment of the iron curtain and the intellectual slavery of a good portion of the earth.

Patrick Farrell says

This book probably deserves 5 stars for the information provided, but the writing had no flow at all; the

whole middle portion was a pain to read. The longest chapter, regarding infiltration of the Manhattan Project, and the conclusion were both incredibly interesting. Also, while a lot, if not most, of the authors' accusations were sufficiently sourced there was quite a bit of innuendo surrounding supposed spies about whom information isn't as conclusive.

Taken in total I would say this book is a good read for those interested in the world of spies or the KGB, but could turn off the casual observer.

Alberto says

Intensely boring. If you're looking for a "The Great Betrayal" or "Spycatcher" type of story, you won't find it here. This is an extremely dry recitation of facts, organized in no discernible order. It would put PhDs researchers working in this field to sleep. And to top it off, it isn't even particularly precise. It commits slight but nevertheless noticeable errors like referring to KGB officers and KGB stations in the 1930s. (KGB was created in 1954. Presumably the authors mean one of its predecessors, the NKVD and the MGB.) It's a tough read, and ultimately it's simply not worth the trouble. There are a lot better books out there if this topic is of interest to you.

George Stenger says

Very detailed, dense coverage of how the KGB ruthlessly infiltrated various facets of US Society (Government, Academia, Press, etc.) to allow the USSR stay abreast of the Federal Government's support for this supposed Ally during WW2, and obtain through spycraft the secrets to getting even with the US in the Atomic Race after WW2.

Nicola says

This book assumes a LOT of knowledge. Definitely not a 'baby's first spy book'. One for spy history anoraks who want to rake over every minute detail. Personally, I found the 100 or so pages I read of it boring as fuck.

Dan says

"The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America" by Haynes, Klehr and Vassiliev appears now to be a primary reference for KGB and GRU espionage operations in the U.S. from the 1920's into the 1960's. Vassiliev had access to a trove of classified KGB files. Their accuracy is confirmed and supplemented by Soviet transmissions decrypted by our codebreakers (the Venona Project) and by the several KGB defectors including Whitaker Chambers and Elizabeth Bentley. The most damaging spies were U.S. citizens.

It's disturbing to find that Joseph McCarthy's infamous list of Communists In The U.S. Government had a good number of these spies on it. He knew that they were spies (and he didn't know the half of it). Few of them could be named or pursued because that would reveal sensitive sources, notably that we had learned how to partially decrypt some of their transmissions; others were protected by superspies in high positions

such as Harry Dexter White and Alger Hiss. Too bad McCarthy imploded; he gave anti-communism a bad name (McCarthyism) and enabled leftist elements to insist for decades that spies like Hiss and Julius and Ethyl Rosenberg were merely victims of a witch hunt. Rather their extensive, lengthy and seriously damaging espionage is detailed in Soviet records and by decoded transmissions and defectors.

A spy here alerted the KGB in 1948 that U.S. codebreakers were becoming able to decrypt coded Soviet transmissions. The Soviets then upgraded their encryption systems. Thus we were in the dark as to Soviet intentions in 1950, and Stalin knew it and now had the A-bomb.

The USSR detonated their first nuclear weapon in 1949, which took us by surprise. The plans and technology for the A-bomb and later the H-bomb were stolen from us by Soviet spies, saving them both untold billions of dollars, which they could ill afford after the war, and also many years of research and testing. Their A-bomb put Stalin in little fear of any U.S. nuclear weapon advantage. The now-secure encryption system enabled him and Mao secretly to implement the military buildup and prosecute the surprise invasion of South Korea in 1950, initiating the Korean War, death toll over 1.2 million, 40,000 Americans dead or missing, otherwise a draw.

In 1929 U.S. Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson shut down our only counterespionage agency, sniffing "Gentlemen don't read each other's mail." It took decades to catch up. He died a few months after the Korean invasion. Wonder whether he noticed any connection.

This book should be read by everyone. Persons not especially interested in espionage and its far-reaching political, economic, military and technological consequences can read just the sections which look more interesting, so as not to tire of the considerable amount of detail about dozens of spies. All were real human beings with their own occupations, histories and sets of problems. I enjoyed every detail. The business is still booming; technologically advanced countries are losing many tens of billions of dollars and many tens of thousands of jobs each year just to industrial espionage.

The American Conservative says

"Spies is not exactly bedtime reading—unless, that is, you're an insomniac. It is filled with confusing code names, long stretches of argumentation linking those names with real persons, and interminable minutiae detailing every known movement of the dramatis personae. The book reads more like an encyclopedia than a narrative. It fails as entertainment, but succeeds as an indictment of an entire era in which some of the nation's best and brightest sold their souls to a foreign master—and as a stinging, definitive rebuttal to those who have defended Alger Hiss all of these years."

Read the full review, "Seeing Reds," on our website:
<http://www.theamericanconservative.co...>

Lauren Albert says

Who would have thought that reading about spies could be so darn boring. Now, I'm not naive--I realize that the world of intelligence is not like a James Bond movie. But this reads like nothing so much as the files of the Human Resources department of a large corporation--recruitment, background checks, job descriptions

(responsibilities), employee evaluations, firings, salary and benefit negotiations, etc. Just throw in some secret code names and passwords and you've got Spies--the book. I recommend this book only for someone who has an interest in Intelligence, the KGB, etc.

Craig Adamson says

reviewed in WSJ
