

Distorting the Past

Harvey Klehr

In the past decade new archival evidence from both the former Soviet Union and previously classified American files—the Venona decryptions—has shed new light on Soviet espionage in the United States. We now know—with no doubt—that Julius Rosenberg was a Soviet spy, that Whittaker Chambers told the truth about Alger Hiss, that hundreds of Americans worked for Soviet intelligence agencies, and that virtually all of them were members of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA).

In a recent book, *In Denial: Historians, Communism and Espionage*, John Haynes and I argued that a number of American historians have lied, dissembled, and used tortuous logic to avoid confronting this new evidence. We were struck by their unwillingness to consider that they might have been wrong or that such important issues as the Alger Hiss case, the Rosenberg case, the accusations made by Elizabeth Bentley about a large ring of Soviet spies in the government, the cooperation of CPUSA leaders with the KGB, and the rationale for the loyalty-security program set up by President Truman had to be reexamined in light of this startling new evidence. Not all were equally culpable—some revisionist historians with whom we had long-standing disagreements about the nature of American communism such as Maurice Isserman frankly acknowledged the significance of the new material, but most did not.¹

Our targets ranged from relatively obscure historians to leaders of the profession, including Eric Foner, past president of both the Organization of American Historians (OAH) and American Historical Association, and Dewitt Clinton Professor at Columbia and Gerda Lerner, past president of the OAH. Some of the reactions to this evidence were almost beyond belief. Paul Buhle, a member of the history faculty at Brown University, has claimed, “as of the late 1990s, documents examined in the Soviet Union or reprinted for scholars offered little that was new in regard to illegal or secret work by Soviet sympathizers.” Buhle’s own writings on the issue were filled with lies and excuses, all designed to minimize the seriousness of Soviet espionage. At one point, for example, he claimed that American communists had given far more illegal aid to the newly independent state of Israel than to the Soviet Union, asserting that many

Harvey Klehr is Andrew Mellon Professor of Politics and History at Emory University, Atlanta, GA. He is, most recently, author of *In Denial: Historians, Communism, and Espionage*, cowritten with John Haynes and published in 2003 by Encounter Books.

American communists had been killed in its War of Independence. When challenged to provide sources for this assertion, Buhle lied—providing a source that did not support his charge—and he has refused to retract his claim or even respond to criticism ever since. Yet, he remains on the roster for the 2004-2005 Distinguished Lecture panel of the OAH. Some responses repeated familiar tropes. Víctor Navasky of Columbia University and the *Nation* magazine went further, musing that Venona was part of a sinister government project “to enlarge post-cold war intelligence gathering capability at the expense of civil liberty.”²

Norman Markowitz of Rutgers University wrote the entry for the Rosenbergs for *American National Biography*, a respected and prominent reference source widely used by students. Markowitz distorted the evidence in the case, dismissed recent revelations from not only Venona but the Rosenbergs’ KGB controller as “discredited” and concluded that they were the victims of a political frame-up, executed because they were Jews. That Markowitz is a public, long-time member of the CPUSA may explain his views but does not begin to explain why the editors would select him to write on the topic, a choice akin to picking a member of the American Nazi party to write on George Lincoln Rockwell.³

Some more responsible historians admitted that the new evidence was legitimate. If Buhle could not see what was in plain sight, these historians rushed to explain the documents away. Anna Kasten Nelson of American University sagely explained that the Venona decrypts, thousands of KGB and GRU messages implicating Americans in espionage, couldn’t be trusted because “agents tend to tell their superiors what they want to hear.” Ellen Schrecker of Yeshiva University agreed that KGB officers in the United States frequently boasted about non-existent contacts.⁴

Schrecker also admitted that the new evidence demonstrated widespread spying but plaintively asked, “Were these activities so awful? Was the espionage, which unquestionably occurred, such a serious threat to the nation’s security that it required the development of a politically repressive internal security system? . . . It is important to realize that as Communists these people did not subscribe to traditional forms of patriotism; they were internationalists whose political allegiances transcended national boundaries. They thought they were building a better world for the masses, not betraying their country.” In his newly published biography of Harry Dexter White, Bruce Craig, director of the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, admits that White provided information to the KGB from the mid-1930s through the end of World War II, but insists that he was a loyal American “whose hopes for the world transcended his loyalties.” Because he had no criminal intent, Craig suggests, it is difficult to say if White was really guilty of espionage.⁵

In their search for excuses for espionage, some historians have champi-

oned history in the service of ideology. This argument of justification is likely to emerge as the new academic consensus. It has the virtue of confronting the new evidence. Robin Kelley, a leading revisionist scholar now at NYU, conducted a fawning interview of old Communist warhorse Herbert Aptheker that appeared in the *Journal of American History* (JAH) in 2000. In response to Kelley's request for advice to young radical historians like himself, Aptheker urged "intense partisanship" as an integral part of their scholarship. Objectivity in history, he noted, means "being part of the Right," and he could not understand "how a human being who has some comprehension of history, of the past and its struggles, can align himself with the Right." In the interview Aptheker smeared two distinguished historians—Oscar Handlin and Daniel Boorstin—and even managed to confuse the two. Neither Kelley nor the editors of the *JAH* had the knowledge or integrity to correct his false assertions.⁶

If this is the situation among professional historians, the question naturally arises of how these topics are being treated in history textbooks. While many of the experts are either denying or frantically spinning these new documents, how have they affected what students are taught about the Hiss and Rosenberg cases? Does the new material affect the discussion of the McCarthy era?

What follows is a very brief and unscientific look at several textbooks, ranging from junior high school to college-level. I asked several friends who teach American history at the secondary level to suggest books that are widely used, but I make no claim that these texts are a representative sample.

Of course, textbooks have to simplify and condense material; they can rarely go into great detail or examine the nuances of particular events. Still, the treatment of Soviet espionage and the reaction to it is both skewed and often filled with inaccuracies and exaggerations. While everyone spends a considerable amount of time on Joseph McCarthy as an arch-villain who vastly exaggerated the problem of Communist subversion, not one textbook mentioned Elizabeth Bentley, who accused—accurately, we now know—dozens of government employees of espionage, two years before McCarthy became prominent and helped convince many Americans that subversion was a clear and present danger. Even when they do discuss the new archival material, some authors qualify their language in odd ways. Few, for example, refrain from explicit condemnation of Senator McCarthy; he's a demagogue, an unscrupulous liar, "madly reckless," a bully, deranged, etc. But, the new material "seems to" or "apparently" or "allegedly" or "is claimed to" support the charges that Hiss and the Rosenbergs were guilty. And the spies are certainly not described as traitors or deluded or dishonorable or un-American or communists.

Two of the books I looked at were published in the mid-1990s. There was already considerable material demonstrating the guilt of the Rosenbergs and Hiss; both Alan Weinstein's *Perjury* and Ron Radosh and Joyce Milton's *The Rosenberg Case* had been published and widely discussed and praised. Yet, Andrew Cayton and his coauthors of *America: Pathways to the Present* (Needham:

Mass; Prentice-Hall, 1995) were unimpressed: during this era, they wrote, there was “a crusade that persecuted not only people who had ties to the Communist party but also anyone whose views leaned toward the left.” Alger Hiss was convicted but “even today Americans still debate the Hiss case.” Similarly “opinion about the Rosenbergs’ guilt was split.” “On very little evidence, they [Americans] began to suspect a strong communist conspiracy to take over the United States.”⁷ James Davidson’s *Nation of Nations: A Narrative History of the American Republic* (NY: McGraw Hill, 1994) misstates the evidence in both the Hiss and Rosenberg cases and baldly asserts that in the case of Hiss “the evidence in the case was far from conclusive” and as for the Rosenbergs, “the evidence was not conclusive.”⁸

A textbook used today in many AP History classes, John Mack Faragher, Mari Jo Buhle et al., *Out of Many: A History of the American People* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall 2003) is far more mendacious. It is sloppy. I was astonished to discover that the Hollywood Ten relied on the First and the Sixth Amendments to the Constitution in refusing to answer questions. I always thought the Fifth Amendment dealt with self-incrimination, but who knew? It is inaccurate, suggesting that many filmmakers were hauled before HUAC because they had worked on “films celebrating America’s working people, a popular depression-era theme but now considered indicative of subversive intentions.” Years after the disclosure of new evidence about Soviet espionage, the authors are willfully blind to that information, perhaps, I might note in passing, because Mari Jo Buhle, professor of history at Brown University and recipient of a McArthur genius grant, is married to Paul Buhle. In discussing the Hiss case, the authors disparage and mischaracterize the initial evidence and suggest the entire affair was cooked up to advance Richard Nixon’s political career. On the Rosenberg case, the authors note that the entire prosecution “rested on the testimony of their supposed accomplices, some of them secretly coached by the FBI.” They conclude by noting the worldwide protests against their execution and add that they continued to assert their innocence. Of the new evidence—not a word. Why McCarthyism? “The way had been paved for it by the inflammatory rhetoric of the Truman Doctrine.” Not one word about Soviet spying.⁹

Paul Boyer and Sterling Stuckey (*The American Nation in the 20th Century*. Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1996) can only say that Nixon revealed “apparent inconsistencies in Hiss’s testimony” that led to his conviction for perjury. Well, no. There were real inconsistencies. There is new evidence that the Rosenbergs were guilty of atomic spying but historians “agree that the death sentences were extreme reactions in the poisonous Cold War climate.” There is no discussion of any other spying.¹⁰

Thomas Bailey, David Kennedy and Lizabeth Cohen, (*The American Pageant: A History of the Republic*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 1998) explain that “many nervous citizens feared that communist spies, paid with Moscow

gold, were undermining the government and treacherously misdirecting foreign policy." Were those fears justified? The authors mention that Hiss was "caught in embarrassing falsehoods" and sent to prison for perjury. They write that "the stunning success of the Soviet scientists in developing an atomic bomb was presumably due, at least in part, to the cleverness of communist spies." The Rosenbergs were "notorious among those Americans and Britishers who had allegedly leaked atomic data to Moscow," but this seems awfully thin gruel for those fears.¹¹

Gary Nash's *American Odyssey: The United States in the Twentieth Century* (NY: Glencoe, McGraw-Hill, 1997), a textbook for junior high and middle school, denounces "unscrupulous Americans" who used fear to gain political power. Nash recognizes and mentions the evils of communism, although describing Stalin's methods as "strong-arm tactics" doesn't quite seem to capture his techniques. And then there is the inaccurate claim that "by World War II public interest in communism in the United States had virtually died." While acknowledging that there was extensive Soviet spying, Nash claims, incredibly and wrongly, that Alger Hiss "was eventually exonerated from any wrongdoing." Although he notes that "recently released Soviet documents seem to confirm the Rosenbergs' guilt," in a section encouraging "critical thinking," Nash adds that "in the end, few spies were purged from the United States government" but many people had their lives ruined. At the close of this unit, Nash suggests that teachers ask students about the significance of the Hiss case. In parentheses he supplies the correct answer: It "showed how frightened government officials were of spies, and it made Nixon well known." If the evidence is sufficient to make McCarthy a demagogue, why is it not sufficient to call Hiss or Rosenberg spies? Or to note that the government identified dozens as spies? Or that one lesson of the Hiss case was that communist espionage was more than a delusion or a route to winning political points.¹²

Nash's college text, *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society* (NY: Pearson Education, Inc. 2004), is both more sophisticated and sensible. He admits that although Hiss "continued to assert his innocence . . . evidence made available much later makes his involvement clear." The next paragraph, however, helpfully puts the Hiss case in perspective: it "helped justify the even worse witch-hunts that followed." And, Nash contrasts the American response to espionage to that of the British who "had dealt with disclosures of espionage more quietly and gracefully," but tactfully omits that their spies tended to escape to Moscow or be knighted. And, although he argues that "as with most historical questions, there are no easy answers, but both sides must be weighed," neither he nor any of the other textbooks I looked at attempt to offer as balanced an account of McCarthy or espionage as they do of the "alleged" spying of Hiss or the Rosenbergs.¹³

The one reaction of academic historians that has not yet filtered down to the textbook writers is to justify espionage on behalf of Joseph Stalin as a higher

form of patriotism. One suspects that might be a tad too outré. Far better to ignore or minimize Soviet espionage or just denounce the reaction to it as excessive.

What is to be done? Teachers and school board members need to point out the egregious lies of some textbooks and the omissions of others. To Nash's credit, he authorized Bob Gabrick, a high school history teacher from Minnesota to work with me to produce a curriculum unit for high schools. *Communism, Espionage and the Cold War*, published by Nash's National Center for History in the Schools, was released this spring. It offers a variety of curricular options to teach students about Soviet espionage and to provide a more balanced view of the McCarthy era.¹⁴ On this issue, many historians are capable of being embarrassed because facts are, after all, stubborn things.

Notes

1. John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *In Denial: Historians, Communism and Espionage* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003).
2. Paul Buhle, "Secret Work," in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, ed. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, 2nd ed (New York: Oxford, 1998), 735–737; Victor Navasky, "Tales from Decrypts," *Nation*, 28 October 1996, 5–6.
3. Norman Markowitz, "Rosenberg, Ethel, and Julius Rosenberg," in *American National Biography*, vol. 18 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 879–891; <http://www.anb.org/articles/index.html>. In 2002 Markowitz announced that he had been a member of the CPUSA for 24 years. History News Network Staff, "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been a Member of the Communist Party?" *History News Network* [WWW Journal] <http://hnn.us/articles/288.html>.
4. Anna Kasten Nelson, "Illuminating the Twilight Struggle: New Interpretations of the Cold War," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 25 June 1999, B5; Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), 180.
5. Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 178–179; Bruce Craig, *Treasonable Doubt: The Harry Dexter White Spy Case* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 276.
6. Herbert Aptheker and Robin D.G. Kelley, "An Interview with Herbert Aptheker," *Journal of American History* 87, no. 1 (June 2000), 168–171.
7. Andrew Cayton, et al. *America: Pathways to the Present* (Needham: Mass; Prentice-Hall, 1995) 733, 735, 736.
8. James Davidson, et al. *Nation of Nations: A Narrative History of the American Republic* (New York: McGraw Hill, Inc., 1994), 1101–1102, 1110.
9. John Mack Faragher, Mari Jo Buhle, et al., *Out of Many: A History of the American People* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall 2003), 802–805.
10. Paul Boyer and Sterling Stuckey, *The American Nation in the 20th Century* (Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1996), 450–451, 463–464.
11. Thomas Bailey, David Kennedy, and Elizabeth Cohen, *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 1998), 900–901.
12. Gary Nash, *American Odyssey: The United States in the Twentieth Century* (NY: Glencoe, McGraw-Hill, 1997), 641–647.
13. Gary Nash, *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society* (NY: Pearson Education, Inc., 2004), 955–961.
14. Robert Gabrick and Harvey Klehr, *Communism, Espionage, and the Cold War: A Unit of Study for Grades 9–12* (UCLA: National Center for History in the Schools, 2004).