Pale and slightly pimply-faced, with socks bunched up around the ankles, Theodore Hall, a physics prodigy recruited to work at Los Alamos, N.M., approached journalist Sergey Kurnakov in 1944 and offered to supply information about the "special military weapon" on which he was working. The Soviet Union, Hall told Kurnakov, was the only country that could be trusted with "such a terrible thing" as an atomic bomb.

Hall was one of hundreds of Americans who assisted Soviet intelligence agencies in the 1930s and '40s. In "Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America," John Earl Haynes, a historian at the Library of Congress; Harvey Klehr, a professor of politics and history at Emory University; and Alexander Vassiliev, a former KGB officer and Soviet journalist, draw on extensive research in KGB archives to provide a fascinating account of the practices of "konspiratsia," espionage tradecraft.

The authors argue that by providing secrets about diplomatic, economic and scientific developments, spies for the KGB "changed history." Acknowledging that many of Joseph McCarthy's charges were "wildly off the mark," they insist, nonetheless, that investigations of individuals with access to sensitive information were not witch hunts but rational responses to a substantial threat to the security of the United States.

"Spies" is less a history of the rise and fall of the KGB than a richly detailed narrative of the relationships between American sources and their Soviet handlers. While a few spies did it for the money, the authors demonstrate that most, such as Hall, were "energized by ideological zeal."

And the fruits of espionage were, on occasion, substantial. In one month of 1944, for example, Treasury official Harold Glasser provided memoranda about Allied policies toward neutral countries, Soviet-Polish relations, control of Germany's finances and changes to armistice terms with Italy. And, the authors remind us, thanks to Klaus Fuchs, Julius Rosenberg and others the Soviet Union developed an atomic bomb with minimal strain on its postwar economy, emboldening Stalin to authorize Kim Il Sung to attack South Korea in 1950.

Haynes, Klehr and Vassiliev, however, do not adequately interrogate the "raw data" in the files of the KGB. Despite the claims of Soviet operatives, the vast majority of the intelligence they gathered wasn't very valuable.

Nor do the authors distinguish sufficiently between sources and agents. Harry Dexter White, an architect of the historic Bretton Woods monetary agreement, they acknowledge, cooperated with the KGB "to the extent he wished but didn't take orders" -- and tended to offer advice and not information. Should they, then, claim him as "the most highly placed asset the Soviets possessed in the American government?" Does talent spotting and passing along of "journalistic tidbits" justify the assertion that I.F. Stone was "a fully active agent" for the KGB between 1936 and 1938?

Although they paint with too broad a brush, the authors' judgments of Alger Hiss, Robert Oppenheimer and dozens of little-known or long-forgotten pro-Soviet government officials, scientists and journalists are likely to keep historians busy for decades re-assessing the infiltration of the American government by the KGB. Who said the Cold War is over?
SPIES
John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr and Alexander Vassiliev
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