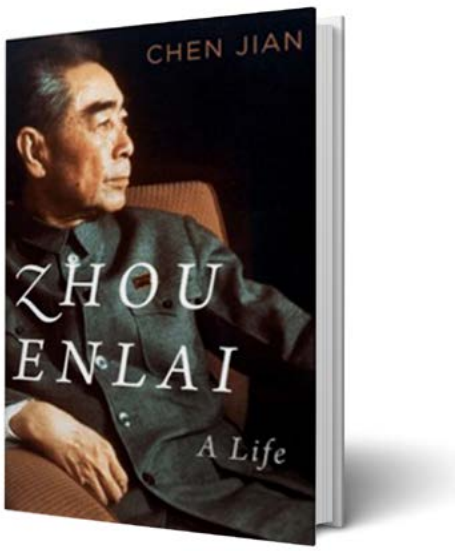
intelligence in public media

Zhou Enlai: A Life



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In seeking to fulfill his ambition to remake the global order, People's Republic of China (PRC) President Xi Jinping often looks to Foreign Minister Wang Yi to help implement that grand vision. In his role, Wang is one of the most front-facing individuals of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) outside of Xi. Early in his tenure, Wang said that Zhou Enlai, the creator and first head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1949–58), would "always be a model for diplomats"[a] and recounted Zhou's view that PRC emissaries must tackle their duties in the same way the People's Liberation Army did. Another PRC diplomat recounted that within the Foreign Ministry one "can criticize Mao Zedong, but you cannot criticize Zhou Enlai."[b] These comments should come as no surprise, as Wang's father-in-law served as an aide to Zhou, but today's consistent mentions of the late premier reflect the reality that Zhou's shadow continues to loom large over Beijing's rise as a global power.

In *Zhou Enlai: A Life*, Cornell University historian Chen Jian traces Zhou's life from humble beginnings in Jiangsu Province to a top CCP leader and China's point figure in international relations. Chen, who was born in China and earned his first college degree in a Chinese university and still teaches in Chinese institutions, is well

a. Peter Martin, *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 199.
b. Ibid., 16.

placed to tell this story, having previously published well-received books on Beijing's decision to enter the Korean War and PRC foreign policy under Mao.[a] Chen is extraordinarily adept in utilizing Chinese sources, a skill on ample display in this, the most deeply researched and comprehensive English-language biography ever written on Zhou. His sources included material found in the Chinese Central Archive, the Foreign Ministry Archive, several provincial archives, numerous diplomatic papers of key CCP leaders, as well as selected Chinese-language works on Zhou, even including a compendium of his poetry. [b]

Zhou Enlai, A Life is told chronologically in four parts: Zhou's early life; the Chinese Communist revolution; the early PRC; and the years, including the Cultural Revolution, leading up to Zhou's death in 1976. In judging Zhou's legacy, Chen finds a middle ground, somewhere between the CCP's official record that hails him as an exalted individual and scholarship that holds Zhou responsible for supporting the worst excesses of the Mao era. (5–7) In sum, Chen provides a nuanced treatment of Zhou.

Beginning with Zhou's early life in Huai'an, Chen positions Zhou in a traditional Chinese class in which classical education was expected of male children who would compete for official government positions. Zhou's mother and aunt instilled in him an appreciation for knowledge and Chinese traditions, and Chen writes that there was "always a place reserved in his mind for the teachings of the ancient Chinese sages that he learned in his childhood, even once he seemed to have wholeheartedly embraced Communist ideologies and revolutionary philosophies." (17)

In 1910, at the age of 13, and one year before the fall of the Qing Dynasty, Zhou went to live with an uncle in Northeast China. He never returned to Huai'an, spending the next decade studying and working in different parts of China before traveling to Japan and Europe. Living in Paris in the immediate aftermath of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution made an impact on Zhou, and it was there in 1922 that he wrote: "We should believe in the theory of Communism as well as the principles of class revolution and proletarian dictatorship." (59) Chen notes that Zhou's commitment to communism stemmed from his genuine feeling of shame over "China's backwardness" and his belief that national liberation was only achievable through revolution. Chen also notes that Zhou thought the "country's salvation should be associated with greater meanings and purposes," than those of capitalist and imperialist states. (60)

Zhou returned to China in 1924, meeting Mao for the first time and subsequently leading the CCP's clandestine operations in Shanghai from 1927 to 1931. There he earned the respect of party leaders as an individual who could run day-to-day intelligence operations. Of Zhou's time in Shanghai, Chen writes that "Zhou's control over the administrative power and intelligence network of the party, and then the party-state, would endure," and "although Zhou never became the paramount leader of the party, he consistently stood at the center of the party's operational network." (110) By 1943, Zhou made clear where he stood on Mao's leadership, publicly proclaiming that "Comrade Mao Zedong's direction is the direction of the Chinese Communist Party." (217) For Chen, Zhou's sincerity was unclear, but his statement supporting Mao "formed the basis on which Zhou was to work with Mao in the decades to come."

Following the CCP's victory in 1949 over Chiang Kai-shek's Guomindang forces, Zhou became both the PRC's premier and foreign minister, occupying a key role in Mao's inner-circle in leading the government and China's diplomacy—Zhou was central in negotiations with the Soviet Union in 1950 which secured $300 million in loans for Beijing along with territorial concessions in Northeast China. (298). He and his wife, Deng Yingchao, moved into the Zhongnanhai leadership complex in Beijing along with Mao and other CCP leaders.

a. *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (Columbia University Press, 1995) and *Mao's China and the Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

b. Others who have used Chinese archival material as well include Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*; Julian Gewitz, *Never Turn Back: China and the Forbidden History of the 1980s*; Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World*. Gregg Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry During the Cold War*.

Richard Nixon Library, February 21, 1972

In chapter 16, one of the book's most insightful, Chen meticulously recounts PRC diplomacy and strategy during the Korean War. Zhou oversaw China's involvement in Korea, meeting several times with Kim Il Sung and engaging with Moscow and Pyongyang as the conflict unfolded. Zhou also handled PRC diplomacy toward Vietnamese communists and their leader, Ho Chi Minh. After attending the Geneva Conference in 1954, it fell on Zhou's shoulders to convince Vietnamese communists to accept a negotiated settlement to end their war against the French. At a key meeting in Liuzhou, China, not far from the Vietnam border, Zhou delivered a detailed assessment of why it was critical the Vietminh accept the deal, noting that an expanded conflict, like the one just stopped in Korea, served no one's purpose. Ho ultimately accepted Zhou's reasoning. (372) Zhou became a staunch advocate of supporting revolutions in Africa and Latin America. (492) With respect to Taiwan, Chen argues that Zhou played a role in softening Beijing's tone following a series of clashes in the mid-1950s. (418) However, a crisis in 1958, instigated by Mao, demonstrated just how much salience the issue had for CCP leaders.

Regarding domestic issues, which also fell into Zhou's sprawling portfolio, Chen paints Zhou as having a pragmatic side, while recognizing his need to stay in Mao's good graces. When Mao decided to rush Chinese economic development during the mid-1950s, Zhou initially cautioned against a "rash advance," drawing the chairman's ire. At a CCP National Congress in 1958, Mao chastised Zhou for "failing to get the bigger picture" and accused him of stoking divisions within the party. Sensing his political standing was faltering, Zhou took responsibility for his mistake of opposing a "rash advance," stating publicly that "as proven by China's revolution and reconstruction, Chairman Mao has represented the truth." (414) Within a year of this speech, Mao launched the disastrous Great Leap Forward. Chen credits Zhou's political sense for helping him navigate the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), when Mao sought to reinvigorate his control over the CCP by turning loose mobs of young party members (Red Guards) to attack individuals who had putatively lost their way and slipped back into capitalist and counterrevolutionary behavior. In Chen's view, Zhou understood the chaos Mao had unleashed and did what he could, at times, to protect colleagues and maintain "administrative and executive power" in the country. (574)

The last chapters of the book detail one of the most important periods of Zhou's career—managing détente with the United States in the 1970s. Zhou held secret meetings with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in Beijing to lay the groundwork for President Richard Nixon's visit in February 1972 and succinctly set out the PRC's position on the most vexing question in the bilateral relationship: the status of Taiwan. In Chen's view, Zhou was shrewd and adept at taking

on Mao's directives for what the PRC wanted to accomplish in any new relationship and articulating that vision to Kissinger. He could be pragmatic in one meeting with Kissinger and fiercely ideological in the next. Ultimately, Zhou and Mao were pleased with Washington's willingness to recognize "only one China and that Taiwan was part of China." (635) When President Nixon arrived in Beijing, Zhou's hand was the first he shook after disembarking Air Force One.

Zhou Enlai's approach to global affairs was based on a view that post-1949 China needed to act assertively to remedy a "century of humiliation" at the hands of Western powers. For those familiar with Beijing's current thinking, that should sound familiar. While Zhou could be a shrewd and pragmatic diplomat, he was also a committed revolutionary whose ideology and sense of historical determinism influenced his foreign policymaking. For intelligence professionals, recognition of the CCP's complicated past and historical trajectory, from victors in the Chinese Civil War to rising power, is essential to understanding how Beijing approaches its place in the world today. Ultimately, Chen's book is as much a story of the CCP's rise and its influence on the Cold War and beyond as it is a profound biography of one of the PRC's founding leaders and most important diplomat. ■

intelligence officer's bookshelf

Short reviews by Hayden Peake and other contributors (These reviews originally appeared in Studies in September 2024.)

Biography

Agent Link: The Spy Erased from History
by Raymond J. Batvinis
(Roman & Littlefield, 2024), 325 pages.

Sometime in 1934, William Weisband, a clerk working for the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York was recruited by the KGB and given the codename LINK. Fifteen years later another KGB agent he turned him in to the FBI. Although his codename appeared in the VENONA traffic, he never spent a day in jail for his spying. Espionage historian and retired FBI special agent Raymond Batvinis tells this unusual counterintelligence story in *Agent Link*.

That Weisband was a KGB agent during World War II is not a revelation, but many details of his life and espionage operations have not been reported because his FBI, NSA, US Army, and KGB files were unavailable until recently. Some remain classified, but Batvinis acquired enough new material to provide a more thorough, although still incomplete, account of Weisman's life.

The files say he was born Wolfe Weisband in Alexandria, Egypt, on August 28, 1908, although later in life he would say he was born in Russia. His parents had emigrated to the United States to escape persecution there. In 1925, the family moved to New York City, where Wolfe soon became William. He would quickly become enamored of a libertine lifestyle in the city. Trying to support what became expensive habits, he took a series of clerical jobs in hotels. Batvinis estimates that during his six-year stint at the Waldorf Astoria, he began to work for the KGB, but exactly when and under what circumstances remains classified (or lost) in Russian files. Although Moscow's new agent had no technical expertise, Batvinis suggests he was just right for service as a courier. In any case, his immediate financial problems were solved.

Agent Link follows Weisband's courier and later agent-handling career in the 1930s and early 1940s, when he moved to California and began running agents, including Jones Orin York, who would betray him to the FBI after the war. Batvinis also describes Weisband's military career, which began when he was drafted into the US Army on September 1, 1942. Mainly because of his linguistic skills, he was eventually commissioned, sent to signal school at Ft. Monmouth, New Jersey, and then served overseas, all the while still serving as a KGB agent. Returning to the States in late 1944, he was assigned to Arlington Hall Station, where Army Signal Corps code-breaking was headquartered. It was there that he would do the most damage, translating what came to be called the VENONA messages and, of course, informing the KGB that its messages were being decoded. Batvinis stresses that Weisband didn't know to whom the traffic referred, since codenames were used. That revelation was provided by Kim Philby. Thus, Batvinis concludes, by 1949, "there was nothing that American code breakers were doing that Moscow didn't know." (253)

On February 2, 1948, after Meredith Gardner, the VENONA codebreaker, discovered that a KGB spy codenamed NEEDLE was Jones Orin York, Weisband's days were numbered. Batvinis describes what happened after York identified LINK and why Weisban eventually served a year in jail for contempt of court. Once free, he had periodic, troubled contacts with the FBI and NSA as he tried to support his family. He died on May 14, 1967, with his wife Mabel and their children at his side.

Agent Link features an unusual literary style that gives the reader a broad view, not only of Weisband, but of the many intelligence officers and agents with whom he had direct and indirect contact. For example, in addressing the defection of GRU code clerk Igor Gouzenko, Batvinis provides a short

biography of Gouzenko before addressing his impact on LINK. Likewise with Philby, Eliza-beth Bentley, Anatoli Golitsyn, Alexander Feklisov, and many FBI special agents.

Intelligence

In the Labyrinth of the KGB: Ukraine's Intelligentsia in the 1960s–1970s
by Olga Bertelsen
(Lexington Books, 2022) 370 pages.

After practicing medicine and dental surgery in Ukraine, Dr. Olga Bertelsen earned a PhD at the University of Nottingham—where she focused on Soviet/Russian history and intelligence. She went on to teach and study at several US universities. She is currently an associate professor of global security and intelligence at Tiffin University in Ohio.

In the Labyrinth of the KGB is the story of the Kharkiv intelligentsia, multiethnic writers who after Khrushchev's 1956 secret speech revealing the true Stalin, explored the limits of free expression. Bertelsen uses the "labyrinth" to refer to the many paths of expression writers attempted to pursue only to be blocked by the KGB in the 1960s and 1970s.

This opposition to free expression was not new. As Bertelsen shows, attempts to eradicate Ukrainian nationalism and Zionism, its two major targets, had a long history under Stalin. Ukrainians took what came to be called the "Khrushchev Thaw" after de-Stalinization as an opportunity to revive their national culture and consciousness, but the Soviets viewed this as a threat to national identity. By the second half of 1958, the crippling reality of re-Stalinization had set in.

Bertelsen gives examples, as told by the Kharkiv writers themselves, about how they were forced to comply with KGB rules that left no space for artistic or creative expression on particular matters. The topic of the *Holodomor*, the Stalin enforced famine in Ukraine during 1932–33, is a good illustration. Official opposition to treatment of this topic was well known and yet the authors found ways of mentioning it. Among other responses, the KGB resorted to what Bertelsen calls "memorycide" and "burning approximately 600,000 volumes of ancient prints, rare books, and manuscripts." (204)

Most of the time, Bertelsen uses the term "local" KGB or just KGB to identify those trying to enforce policies, but she notes that in July 1967,

> *The KGB created special counterintelligence departments to combat the ideological sabotage.… The Fifth Directorate and its subordinate departments were charged with the mission to conduct surveillance of the most active dissidents or individuals who attracted the KGB's attention by their nonconformist behavior. Each Fifth Chief Directorate operative used seven to 10 informers who methodically listened to the writers' conversations in cultural institutions, the Writers' Union, and its literary sections, conveying their content to their handlers. (30)*

In the Labyrinth of the KGB is based largely on interviews with surviving authors and KGB operational documents found in the central (Kyiv) Security Services archives (former KGB archives) in Ukraine. They document the story of Kharkiv writers who endured the policies and penalties implemented by an authoritarian regime and forecast what is likely to occur if the current Russian government is successful in Ukraine. ■

The Russian FSB: A Concise History of the Federal Security Service
by Kevin Riehle
(Georgetown Univ. Press, 2024), 197 pages.

The acronym "KGB" was consigned to history with the demise of the Soviet Union on December 26, 1991. The security and intelligence functions it performed were not. Retired US intelligence analyst Kevin Riehle, a lecturer in intelligence and security studies at Brunel University in London, has written an excellent account of the struggles of the Russian Federation to create intelligence successor organizations.

The Russian FSB begins with a capsule history of Russian security elements and their frequently changed names from tsarist times to the present. Some missions changed over time, but one did not: protect the "tsar." (7)

In the early 1990s, a number of new security organizations were created, each quickly succeeded by variants until the reorganization in 1995 when the Federal Security Service (FSB) officially founded. At first glance, it resembled the old KGB because it absorbed three of the KGB's four main directorates. Only the KGB's First Chief Directorate, responsible for foreign intelligence

remained independent of the FSB; that was the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR).

In practice much had changed. The FSB was given expanded responsibilities in law enforcement, intelligence collection—including HUMINT—covert action, and border security in Russia, along with the authority to operate in the former Soviet republics, especially for counterterrorism liaison purposes. Riehle concludes that this makes the FSB Russia's "primary clandestine service within the former Soviet space." (2) FSB authority increased further in 2003 and 2004, when the SIGINT elements and border guards directorate were subordinated to the FSB. Since then, the FSB has been Russia's foremost security and intelligence service.

Riehle describes the new organization, its functions and leadership, especially its dependence on President Putin. He suggests the FSB was at least partially responsible for an erroneous assessment that a quick victory could be achieved in Ukraine—a conclusion that took a toll on the leadership and trust. (157) Although less is known about personnel issues, training, assassinations, and digital warfare elements, Riehle mentions them while acknowledging source limitations. His main Russian sources—Agentura.ru and the Dossier Center—are posted by Russians living in the West. He does rely on Russian media for information on FSB corruption, which has gotten ample attention.

The FSB has made many enemies within the Russian ruling elite and society. The former from current practices discussed in the book, the latter from the fearful burden of the KGB's second chief directorate, whose legacy of domestic counterintelligence and the gulag is not forgotten. *The Russian FSB* sees little hope for improvement in the Putin era. A valuable contribution to the intelligence literature. ■