

Early Cold War Spies: The Espionage Trials That Shaped American Politics

John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. xii + 251.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

No matter how familiar a spy case may be, a fresh look can usually bring new insights. Very often, however, authors and practitioners limit themselves to drawing narrow lessons—usually they study such cases as those of Aldrich Ames or Robert Hannsen in the hope of learning how to stop future spies before they can wreak comparable havoc. Sometimes, especially when looking at cases that became great causes celebres, like those of Alfred Dreyfus, Alger Hiss, or the Rosenbergs, historians and political scientists try to evaluate a particular case's effects on politics, culture, and society. Seldom, however, do authors attempt to use a comparative approach and present several cases at once. This is unfortunate, for comparative studies of espionage hold great promise for teasing new, broad lessons out of well-worked ground.

In their new book, *Early Cold War Spies*, historians John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr review the major espionage cases of the early Cold War era, beginning with the *Amerasia* affair and ending with the Soblen trial. By looking at how the cases were understood at the time and then adding what has been learned about them since the end of the Cold War, they “hope to better assess the history of American politics and public opinion regarding communism and anticommunism” during the 15 years following World War II (17). While Haynes and Klehr fall somewhat short of this ambitious goal, their book still is very good, both as an introductory text and as an example of the promise that comparative study holds for expanding our understanding of espionage, intelligence, and the political environment in which they are carried out.

Intelligence officers are taught not to be involved in politics. From the day they take their oaths—or earlier, even, in application interviews—their managers and instructors repeatedly tell them that they are to be nonpartisan in their work and never to align themselves with any external political agendas. They are taught that their roles are to collect and report information as accurately as possible, and to analyze it without bias or preconceptions. Indeed, in this belief system the highest achievement is to deliver analysis that a consumer might find unpalatable, for it confirms the integrity of the system and its officers. This is especially true for officers working in counterintelligence and counterespionage, who are trained to follow leads wherever they may go and be

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prepared to take legal actions, no matter how unpleasant the consequences might be.

Daily life, however, is more complicated. Every intelligence agency is a part of the government, and their activities are subject to the ebb and flow of political processes, as anyone who has ever briefed a high-level Executive Branch customer or member of Congress is well aware. Intelligence products are important to the policymaking process, and various factions—in both the executive and legislative branches, as well as outside of government—seek to exploit them in debates; the Team A-Team B episode in the 1970s is instructive in this regard. Similarly, the leaders of intelligence agencies are shrewd political operators in their own right, skilled at defending their agencies' interests, promoting programs, obtaining resources, and manipulating public perceptions of their work. The result is that the intelligence world is one with complex, constantly shifting political dynamics. Individual officers may seek to live up to their ideal of being outside of politics, but they live in an environment in which politics are part of everyday life.

One of the more striking, although not altogether surprising, aspects of intelligence politics is how the same issues surface again and again. Many of the debates in American foreign policy since 1945, and especially since 1991, have centered on how to maintain the country's dominant position in the world. The result has been recurrent debates about such issues as relative military power, nuclear proliferation, economic competitiveness, and how to deal with nondemocratic ideologies and rogue states. Intelligence plays a large role in each of these questions, and criticisms of the Intelligence Community's performance tend to be repeated in each cycle of debate. On the collection side, complaints about the US over-reliance on technical collection and the urgent need to improve human collection have been heard for decades. Criticisms of analytical biases and procedures, poor understandings of foreign cultures, and demands to increase the use of alternative analyses and new methodologies are perennials—the post-Iraq debates about how to improve analysis are not much different from those that followed the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the Iranian revolution in 1979, or the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In each of these cases, public debates have gone over the same ground and resolved little. The result appears to be a firm public perception that US intelligence agencies are extraordinarily proficient at technical collection, abysmal at espionage, and somewhere in between when it comes to analysis.

The same is true in the world of counterintelligence and counterespionage, where major cases have had wide-ranging political effects. The best-known cases of the early Cold War era, those of Alger Hiss and the Rosenbergs, helped feed the growth of McCarthyism and then took on long political lives of their own. They still affect how the American right and left view each other, foreign policy, and intelligence. After the 1950s, ideologically-motivated spies almost disappeared from the United States, but their replacement by troubled or mercenary characters like Jonathan Pollard, Ames, and Hanssen did not lead to a separation of espionage and politics. After Ames's arrest, for example, some members of Congress and prominent intellectuals asked if the Ames affair, combined with the

end of the Cold War and what they claimed was the CIA's long record of intelligence failures, showed that espionage and counterintelligence were essentially pointless activities and wondered if the country would be better off abolishing the CIA; others, for their parts, offered countless suggestions for reforming the CIA. Even more politicized, in 1999 and 2000, was the Wen Ho Lee case, which took place at a time when concerns about rising Chinese military power intersected with Republican accusations that the Clinton administration was not tough enough on Beijing. The result was that the investigation and prosecution of the alleged Chinese spy was stoked—and compromised—by a combination of journalists seeking to chase a hot story and government officials willing to leak sensitive information. Such behavior is common in Washington politics, only here it was applied to what was supposed to be a professional, impartial investigation.¹

What this overview suggests is that the politics of counterintelligence should be similar to those of intelligence in general. Despite all the books and articles that have been written on spy cases, however, few have noted this phenomenon or sought to explore its roots or implications. The number of cases that could be used for comparative studies is large, however, making the field of counterintelligence politics ripe for exploration through comparative analyses. John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, therefore, are in the fortunate position of being among the first to carry out such research.



Haynes and Klehr are among the best qualified historians to look at Cold War spy cases. Indeed, much of our understanding of Soviet espionage in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s is a result of their previous collaborations. Both are experts in the history of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) and in two books, *The Secret World of American Communism* (1995) and *The Soviet World of American Communism* (1998), they used material from newly-opened Soviet archives not only to document how Moscow controlled the party, but also how the leadership of the CPUSA willingly allowed the USSR to use it as an espionage apparatus. In a third book, *Venona* (1999), they described in detail the networks and individual Soviet spies whose operations the Venona program uncovered, filling in many of the blank spots in previous histories.

In *Early Cold War Spies*, Haynes and Klehr present their material in a straightforward, chronological order. They begin with the two episodes that alerted US authorities to the extent of Soviet espionage, the *Amerasia* case and the defection of Soviet code clerk Igor Gouzenko in Canada. They then move briskly through the cases that grew out of Elizabeth Bentley's information, the Hiss

¹ Edward Jay Eptstein, "On the Team," *New Republic*, March 28, 1994; Caleb Carr, "Aldrich Ames and the Conduct of American Intelligence," *World Policy Journal*, Fall 1994; David Ignatius, "Downspying the CIA," *Washington Post*, March 5, 1995; "The Times and Wen Ho Lee," *New York Times*, September 26, 2000.

case, the Rosenbergs and the other atomic espionage cases, the botched prosecution of Judith Coplon, and finish with the little-known Soble-Soblen case. The facts of all these cases now are well settled; Haynes and Klehr present no new research or material but, rather, provide accounts that readers new to the cases or with little background in counterintelligence will find to be clear, concise, and useful for later reference. For those who want more depth, Haynes and Klehr provide an annotated bibliography at the end of each chapter, pointing readers to the major books and materials for each case.

The main theme that Haynes and Klehr follow through their narratives is that the difficulty the government had in establishing investigatory and evidentiary procedures for spy cases meant that the public's understanding of Soviet espionage was significantly distorted. In the late 1940s, the procedures for investigating espionage cases, presenting evidence in court, and protecting classified evidence used in espionage trials still were unclear. (It took more than 30 years, until the passage of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act in 1978 and the Classified Information Procedures Act in 1980, to create a clear set of rules.) Until then, Haynes and Klehr point out, the government often chose not to present the full story behind its prosecutions or was forced to let spies go unprosecuted, either because evidence had been gathered illegally or because no standard procedure existed to protect classified information from defense lawyers' threats to expose it in court. Consequently, the government was vulnerable to charges that it was conducting politically-motivated trials based on stories invented by unreliable witnesses. In the *Amerasia* case, Haynes and Klehr write, because the government could not present its evidence collected from warrantless searches, it "was accused of 'red-baiting,' engaging in vendettas against whistleblowers, and trying to muzzle reporters," while Elizabeth Bentley "was pilloried by historians and journalists as a neurotic, alcoholic fantasist who lied, exaggerated, and embellished her story" (34, 82). Thus, until all the evidence was released in the 1990s and the full stories of these spy cases became clear, historians did not know the true nature of Soviet espionage in the 1940s. As a result of this, and their increasing skepticism during the 1960s and 1970s of government accounts, academics writing on the spy cases often accused the FBI of "orchestrating a witch-hunt of innocent people" (233).

Haynes and Klehr conclude with an effort to apply the lessons of early Cold War espionage cases to current government efforts to cope with terrorist threats. Just as in the late 1940s and 1950s, they point out, the government faces the need to update the rules and procedures for investigations, as well as the requirement to decide how much sensitive information to release to the public to bolster its claims of serious threats. The government now faces the "same dilemmas [as] in several of the early cold war spy trials where defense lawyers demanded disclosure of counterintelligence information that the government insists would seriously harm its efforts to protect the public against terrorist attacks." This, they note, is simply a new manifestation of the problem the American form of government has deciding how to deal with serious internal threats while still striking the "proper balance between security and liberty" (p. 240).

Haynes and Klehr make reasonable points but, in keeping with their goals for *Early Cold War Spies*, limited ones. The lesson that incomplete disclosures can

distort the public's understanding of espionage and cast doubt on the accuracy of other intelligence-related information is correct and well worth remembering. More intriguing, however, are the additional observations Haynes and Klehr make in passing. Taken together, these show the promise that comparative studies hold for understanding the links between counterintelligence and politics.

What stands out most clearly from the cases Haynes and Klehr present is how cyclical the patterns of major espionage cases are. In each, numerous actors insert themselves, with each trying to advance their own interests. In the case of Elizabeth Bentley, for example, her information was of little intelligence value when it became public in 1948—the Russians had long before shut down the networks with which she had been associated and withdrawn most of their intelligence officers from the United States, while the FBI and Justice Department had concluded their investigations and decided not to prosecute most of the individuals identified through her leads. Nonetheless, the FBI and House Un-American Activities Committee were happy to have Bentley tell her story in public, as it bolstered their views of the Soviet threat and the need for strong internal security measures. The press, meanwhile, happily played up the charges of the “red spy queen,” as Bentley was dubbed by the tabloids, to sell newspapers. This combination of political manipulation and sensationalism has occurred repeatedly since the 1940s, most recently in the Wen Ho Lee case. Finally, and usually later in a case, intellectuals like to become involved, trying to use it to support their broader cultural, political, and social analyses.²

These are not the only aspects of the politics of counterintelligence that appear repeatedly. Haynes and Klehr describe another behavior that has repeated itself regularly: in their introduction to the atomic espionage cases, they note that while some critics denounced the cases as witch hunts, others used them to call for a “long-overdue focus on a more rigorous counterespionage program” (138). Indeed, when a major case becomes public, it usually is followed by revelations of poor security or personnel practices, Congressional investigations, and plans for reforms. But as publicity wanes and new issues arise to consume public attention, the reforms are put on the back burner; eventually, old habits and practices reassert themselves. This pattern has been displayed most recently at the Department of Energy which, after all the attention focused on its counterintelligence and security practices during the Lee case, was forced to institute extensive polygraph requirements for its employees. The requirement, however, was largely rolled back in the fall of 2006.³

² For good examples of how intellectuals used early Cold War spy cases in their debates, see Leslie Fiedler, “Hiss, Chambers, and the Age of Innocence,” *Commentary*, December 1950, and “Afterthoughts on the Rosenbergs,” *Encounter*, October 1953, both reprinted in Fiedler, *An End to Innocence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955); and Robert Warshow, “The ‘Idealism’ of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg,” *Commentary*, November 1953, reprinted in Warshow, *The Immediate Experience* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1962). These may be compared usefully with a more recent example, Gabriel Schoenfeld, “How Inept is the FBI?” *Commentary*, May 2002.

³ For the Energy Department and the polygraph, see “Energy Department Polygraph Program Expanded,” *Washington Post*, October 14, 2000; “Polygraphs for Nuclear Weapons Workers,” *New York Times*, October 5, 2006.

Early Cold War Spies is an introductory work and it would be unreasonable to expect it to begin looking too deeply at all of the issues growing out of the cases it describes. Nonetheless, the material it covers hints at some rich possibilities for future research on the politics of counterintelligence. The consistent, repetitive nature of reactions to spy cases points to views and behavior deeply rooted in American political culture. Understanding these, and perhaps comparing them to the ways other political cultures view and react to espionage, might suggest paths to improved investigations and prosecutions, or at least reductions in the damage to intelligence operations that come from the resulting political maneuvering. It would be especially useful given the likelihood that our counterterrorism efforts will lead to a new generation of spy cases and the possibility that we might avoid repeating some of the errors of the Cold War.

