

# **The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America—the Stalin Era**

## ***Intelligence in Recent Public Literature***

By Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev. New York: Random House, 1999.

***Reviewed by William Nolte***

---

*This review originally appeared in Studies in Intelligence 42, no. 4 (1998), a classified issue. See the preceeding review of The KGB File of Andrei Sakharov.*

*[Alger] Hiss and [Whittaker] Chambers worked together as Soviet source and courier from late 1934 until the latter's defection from the underground in 1938.*

Two generations of controversy can be compressed into that spare, declarative statement from *The Haunted Wood*, by Allen Weinstein and former KGB officer Alexander Vassiliev. Alger Hiss was a Soviet spy. Not “according to Whittaker Chambers.” Not “an alleged Soviet agent.” After more than five decades, Hiss's treason can now be stated simply as fact.

But truth is rarely so simple, especially in a case that has stirred so many emotions and is so intertwined with issues larger than the veracity of the two men, Hiss and Chambers, who stood at its center. In December 1998, National Public Radio reported that “recent revelations have convinced *some scholars* that Hiss was guilty.” [Italics added.] For 30 years, defenders

of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg protested their innocence; now they protest their sentencing, with bare mention, in many instances, of the ground that has shifted under the issue.

The Soviet spy cases in the end transcended fact, becoming tests of faith. For Americans who came of age in the 1930s (as for many who came of age in the 1960s), the spy trials have been litmus tests for a range of issues: Nixon and McCarthy, to be sure; the Cold War and the nature of the Soviet Union as well. Even more viscerally, the Hiss case pointed to the cleavages in American history represented by the Depression, the New Deal, and even Vietnam. The last is not an anachronism, by the way, but a reflection of the degree to which the past is ever active, continually reviewed and refocused in our minds. “Which side are you on?” Woodie Guthrie asked, and an opinion on the Hiss case or any of the other trials of the 1940s and 1950s could answer that question across the spectrum of American public policy issues.

Allen Weinstein has studied this controversy for more than 20 years. When his history of the Hiss case, *Perjury*, appeared in 1978, it set off an extraordinary shock, contradicting the presumption which Weinstein had shared that Hiss was an innocent victim of the evil twins of mid-century American anti-communism, Joseph McCarthy and Richard Nixon. A revised, post-Venona edition of *Perjury* appeared in 1997.

*The Haunted Wood* results from an arrangement between its publisher, Random House, and Russia's Association of Retired Intelligence Officers. In exchange for payments to the latter, Russia's intelligence service allowed Weinstein and Vassiliev access to its records and those of its predecessor organizations. Readers “with an ideological ax to grind regarding Soviet espionage,” the authors contend, will find “little comfort” in their work, which, they continue, “neither denounces nor defends Moscow's American espionage.” This is true enough, but readers should not assume the result to be a false attempt at an “evenhanded” account. It is not Ted Turner's Cold War in print. To the contrary, it is an almost numbing account of the details—meetings, reports, payments—that point to the heart of the matter: Soviet espionage happened, on a large scale, and did so through the active involvement of American citizens, a disturbing number of whom held positions of public trust within the Federal government.

Chapter by chapter, Weinstein and Vassiliev recount this activity in a style reminiscent of Solzhenitsyn's painstaking approach to the Gulag Archipelago. At some level, we must deal with truth, including emotional

and spiritual truth. But first we must confront the facts, facts which have been too long concealed by the “Which side are you on?” passions that have dominated the literature of Soviet espionage and the complicity of Americans in it. At that point, the discussion can move on, as, for example, the debate in the Rosenberg case has moved to important and interesting questions, such as the nature of their trial and the severity of their punishment. That discussion could not mature until the fraudulent debate on the fact of their involvement in espionage was largely resolved.

One of the questions *The Haunted Wood* raises, at least by implication, is that of the motives of the Soviet Union’s American accomplices. Recent commentators have contrasted mercenaries like Aldrich Ames and John Walker with the “spies of conviction” of the 1940s. That contrast survives *The Haunted Wood* but not intact. Conviction may have been part of the amalgam of motivation, but so it seems were cultural chic and an element of ennui among some Americans of education and privilege, not to mention sheer self-importance and arrogance. Contrasts can be made between this generation of spies and the Walkers and Pollards, but comparisons exist as well. Every agent of conscience seems to have been matched by at least one or two of conventional wisdom (there being, of course, no enemies on the left), or by a dilettante slow to understand that espionage was not a dining-club game.

Weinstein and Vassiliev also provide important insights into Soviet motives. One element, of course, was the desire to steal American secrets, everything from nuclear information to aircraft plans to cosmetic formulas. (“Tractor drivers of the world, unite. You have nothing to lose but dry hands.”) Perhaps more fascinating is the reminder that Soviet foreign espionage always had a domestic, state survival component. No outside group, no set of Royalist or Trotskyite (or neo-Trotskyite) exiles, could be too insignificant to attract the obsessive attention of Soviet leadership. Weinstein and Vassiliev reinforce the view that Soviet espionage took place not within a Western context that saw clear divisions between domestic and foreign affairs, but within a system that explicitly rejected such a division. One price of being a revolutionary regime is counterrevolutionary paranoia.

What, then, begins to emerge as the truth of Soviet Cold War espionage? That Joseph McCarthy was right all along? About the fact of Soviet espionage, yes. About its penetration into the US government at uncomfortably high levels, yes. But cruelly, heedlessly, and irresponsibly right, in ways that caused permanent damage to the anti-communist

cause. One lesson is that when responsible leadership will not deal with difficult issues, other candidates wait in the wings. When Dean Acheson, rightly counted as one of the great figures in the history of American foreign policy, affirmed that he would never turn his back on Alger Hiss, he opened the door to McCarthy. (Dwight Eisenhower kept the door open by refusing to defend his friend and mentor George Marshall.) Could McCarthy have been deterred? It can be argued that he might simply have found another swamp to play in; it is difficult to imagine he could have found one so damaging to American public life.

For intelligence professionals, the ironies of the evolving historiography of the spy cases are extraordinary, among them that Allen Weinstein began his pursuit of the Hiss-Chambers story as something of an adversary; his Freedom of Information Act suit against the FBI, ultimately successful, was joined by the American Civil Liberties Union. Thus, at least in part, we owe public knowledge of the truth of the definitive fact of the Hiss-Chambers case to the ACLU. This provides its own lesson, namely that the judgments of secrecy in a democratic system can never be made only on the basis of the best interests of its national security services. In the American context, the balance between protecting sources and methods, on the one hand, and on the other ensuring public accountability for military, diplomatic, and even intelligence programs, will never be easily or perfectly made. But attempting those balances considering only costs of disclosure while failing to account for gains—in public trust, in the good name of the United States and its government, and so on—is guaranteed to produce both failure and cynicism, the latter being by far the more dangerous commodity.

Postmodernists will reject the very idea of truth, but new generations of historians may discover that its pursuit and even its imperfect image have value beyond the nihilism current in so much contemporary historical typing. When that generational change occurs, Allen Weinstein will be recognized as a hero of his profession, pursuing its highest standards with tenacity, integrity, and courage. Readers will find this a haunting book, evoking still-painful memories of controversies imbedded in basic moral issues, truth and loyalty prominent among them. In the end, it is truth that sets us free of the dualism that has clouded American discussion of these issues for so much of this century. For too long, the demagoguery of Joseph McCarthy has been used to argue the innocence of Alger Hiss and the Rosenbergs. The truth, in the end, is more complex and even more interesting: McCarthy was a demagogue, and Hiss and his colleagues were traitors.

---

The views, opinions and findings of the author expressed in this article should not be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations or representing the official positions of any component of the United States government.