

***In the Enemy's House: The Secret Saga of the FBI Agent and the Code Breaker Who Caught the Russian Spies***

Howard Blum (HarperCollins, 2018), 317 pp., notes, sources, index.

***Reviewed by David A. Foy***

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In September 1996, an aging Soviet spymaster stood in front of a simple double grave in Pinelawn Cemetery, Long Island, New York. As is customary in such cases, he left a sample of soil from his dacha in Russia as a tribute and memorial to two of his agents, who had paid with their lives for their espionage. Struggling to maintain his composure, retired veteran KGB officer Alexander Feklisov, aka “Sasha,” spoke: “Forgive us for not having known how to save your lives.”

This story of the hunt for the Russian atomic spies—capped by the June 1953 execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg—and the unlikely working friendship that develops over several years between their hunters, FBI agent Bob Lamphere and Arlington Hall codebreaker Meredith Gardner, is the focus of *In the Enemy's House*, a new book by Howard Blum. It would be hard to imagine a more unlikely pairing than Lamphere and Gardner—the gung-ho, idealistic “G-man” who had joined the Bureau in 1941 but who was disillusioned by 1953, and the solitary, reflective, self-assured Gardner, who had learned to read at age three, who had taught himself Yiddish, Hebrew, German, and Spanish by age eight, and who was fluent in a dozen languages by age 23. Lamphere had escaped a dead-end life in the Idaho mining town where he grew up by landing a job at the Treasury Department in Washington, DC, and earning his law degree before joining the Bureau. Gardner earned a Ph.D. in German in 1938 and was teaching the language at the University of Ohio-Akron prior to securing a position in the winter of 1942 at the Army Security Agency (ASA) at Arlington Hall, where “the Army had imposed its brutal aesthetic” (34) on the once stately private girls’ school. Wanting to contribute to the cause, Gardner taught himself Japanese in three months and dove headfirst into decrypting the messages emanating from the Imperial War Command in Tokyo.

Military Intelligence Service deputy chief Col. Carter Clarke, in a moment of prescience, argued that Arlington Hall codebreakers should be reading Russian codes

as well. He created a special two-man cell for that very purpose, an endeavor referred to as the “Russia problem” or, more vaguely, the “Blue problem.” Mysteriously, the initiative ended without explanation after two months, only to be revived later. Lamphere, meanwhile, had fingered a corrupt US government official and was “rewarded” with an assignment to the Soviet espionage squad, which in Lamphere’s mind was only one step short of the dreaded assignment to the Butte, Montana, field office.

The development that changed everything was the Bureau’s August 1943 receipt of a letter in Cyrillic that detailed the operations of a Soviet espionage ring of 10 headed by Soviet undercover diplomat and actual KGB (Blum uses the name “KGB” globally, for simplicity’s sake) officer Vassily Zubilin operating in the United States. This news was bolstered by the September 1945 defection of Soviet code clerk in Ottawa, Igor Gouzenko, heightening suspicions that Soviet intelligence was operating in the United States as well. Just a month later, controversial turncoat Soviet spy Elizabeth Bentley, aka “The Red Queen,” walked into the FBI field office in New Haven, Connecticut, only too eager to share details of her duties as a courier in the Jacob Golos spy ring. Bob Lamphere was re-energized—a secret war was going on in the United States, and he wanted in.

This string of bad news for Russian Foreign Intelligence chief Gen. Pavel Fitin prompted him to shut down all KGB operations in the United States for six months to protect Operation ENORMOZ—the Soviet attempt to steal America’s atomic bomb secrets. As Igor Kurchatov began his new duties as the chief of “Laboratory No. 2” in Moscow, dedicated to developing Russia’s own atomic bomb, New York rezidentura Leonid Kvasnikov arrived in the “Big Apple” in March 1943, living his cover as an employee of AMTORG, the Russian trade organization for the receipt of Lend-Lease equipment. Two promising First Directorate officers, Alexander Feklisov—the future “Sasha”—and Anatoly Yatskov were dispatched to New York to assist Kvasnikov in conducting the stateside

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portion of “Enormoz.” Their joint mission was to learn all they could as quickly as possible about “Laboratory V”—Los Alamos National Laboratory—where US scientists were frantically working with U-235 and plutonium to develop an atomic bomb.

On the codebreaking front, ASA resumed working on the “Blue problem” and was excited to discover that in its haste during the German drive on the capital in 1941, Moscow Center had committed the cryptographic “unforgiveable sin”—inadvertently making three copies of a one-time pad, thereby negating its inherently unbreakable quality. This critical error provided codebreakers like Gardner—who was assigned to the Russian unit in January 1946—a tremendous opportunity. Through painstaking analysis, Gardner reconstructed a KGB First Directorate codebook and wrote “Special Analysis Report No. 1” in late August 1947. The report, titled “Cover Names in Diplomatic Traffic,” made interesting reading for Col. Clarke, who ordered it shared with the FBI—which set up the first awkward meeting between the cryptographer and the counterintelligence agent. This organizational tap dance, fraught with freshman jitters, did, however provide Lamphere with access to a series of plain text messages from New York to Moscow dated 1944—one of which gave the extremely close-hold names of the US scientists working on the Manhattan Project. By October 1948, Lamphere and Gardner had received official sanction for working together to exploit Russian cable traffic and put a stop to secrets-stealing by the Soviets—but to share their progress and findings with only with a select few.

For the next two years, Gardner and Lamphere immersed themselves in a sea of Russian and American names, both given and cover, in their relentless effort to track the web that was Soviet intelligence in the wartime/postwar United States. They learned of “Antenna,” who had been renamed “Liberal,” but only later did they positively identify him as Julius Rosenberg, leader of the Soviet atomic bomb spy ring in the United States. They discovered that “Sasha” had met Rosenberg some 50 times over a three-year period. They became acquainted with ring members Joel Barr (“Meter”) and Alfred Sarant (“Hughes”), working in the US defense industry, and with “Ethel,” identified as simply the wife of “Liberal.”

The Soviets’ detonation of their first atomic bomb in 1949 created shock waves in more locations than the test range at Semipalatinsk. President Harry Truman initially refused to believe that “those Asiatics” (169) were

capable of constructing an atomic device, and Lamphere increasingly felt the weight of secrets he could not share with his FBI supervisors. By now, “Sasha” had returned to Moscow and was the handler for “Rest,” who had worked at Los Alamos and delivered US atomic materials to the Soviets. “Rest” was now working at Harwell, the British atomic research center, and “Sasha” had been reassigned to London, meeting with “Rest” every three to four months. Lamphere, meanwhile, had discovered an esoteric but interesting document in the archives of the US Atomic Energy Commission—a 6 June 1944 paper with the scintillating title “Fluctuations and the Efficiency of a Diffusion Plant.” The author was identified only as “K. Fuchs.” Lamphere suspected that a Soviet spy was among the 15 British scientists handpicked by US physicist Robert Oppenheimer to travel under heavy security from Britain to the United States in November 1943. A February decrypt by Gardner confirmed that assessment, and the two sleuths narrowed the list of candidates to two. Although Lamphere was convinced the spy was Rudolf Peierls, they soon had confirmation that “Rest” was actually the respected, naturalized British citizen Klaus Fuchs.

US authorities informed their British allies of Fuch’s espionage, but the latter took little action initially. One who did act, however, was the Soviet spy in the British embassy in Washington—Donald Maclean—who informed the Soviets that the Americans had tipped the British to Fuchs. The dedicated Fuchs had also supplied his mentors with information about the US hydrogen bomb development, prompting the Soviets to “repurpose” a Soviet town into the closed city of “Arzamas-16,” where Russian scientists turned their talents to creating a Soviet H-bomb. The relentless and increasing pressure of the Bureau on the resistant Fuchs, however, ultimately brought a confession on 24 January 1950 and a prison sentence of 14 years for espionage. In the process of his interrogation, Fuchs provided one tantalizing detail—the name of his contact, “Raymond,” the next step in the trail of bread crumbs Lamphere and Gardner were pursuing.

As it often does, interviewing/interrogating one suspect led to another. While Lamphere had been interrogating Fuchs in London, his special agents had focused on Philadelphia resident Harry Gold, who had forgotten to sweep up a map of Santa Fe, New Mexico, in the rushed cleaning of his house that preceded the serving of a search warrant. Initially resistant, Gold ultimately folded, admitting to serving as a courier—“Raymond”—for Fuchs. Upon his return to the States from interrogating Fuchs,

Lamphere also learned from the now-arrested Gold of a second spy at Los Alamos, an Army NCO with a wife named “Ruth.” The arrest of Gold was the last straw for Moscow Center and “Sasha,” who collectively realized it was time for their spies to run. But the noose was closing rapidly. The Bureau interviewed Los Alamos Army NCO and machinist David Greenglass, who soon identified his handler as brother-in-law Julius Rosenberg, brother to his wife “Ruth,” a.k.a. “Wasp.” On 17 July 1950, Julius was arrested for espionage; four days later, wife Ethel was arrested for refusing to testify.

As Greenglass awaited his sentence, the Rosenbergs went on trial on 6 March 1951. Also in the dock was fellow spy ring member Morton Sobell, aka “Senya,” who had supplied “Sasha” with thousands of pages of secrets about US sonar, infrared rays, and missile guidance systems. Within three weeks, the trio had been convicted of espionage. Ironically, both “Sasha” and Lamphere hoped the Rosenbergs would plead guilty, but they refused. At this point, Lamphere and Gardner, despite the long and successful chase, suffered second thoughts about their part in the unfolding drama, doubts that would powerfully change the course of their subsequent lives. “I never wanted to get anyone in trouble,” Gardner lamented (284), and he and Lamphere were of one mind concerning the “wrongness” of Ethel’s death. Lamphere admitted that a death sentence for Julius “might be correct” but added quickly, “No purpose would be achieved by sentencing Ethel Rosenberg to death.” He drafted a memo for FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover expressing such opinions, a memo Hoover handed to the judge—but which did not change his mind. In his statement to the Rosenbergs, Judge Irving Kaufman intoned, “. . . by the cause of your betrayal, you undoubtedly have altered the course of history to the disadvantage of our country.” (285) The Rosenbergs were condemned to death in the electric chair; Morton Sobell received a 30-year sentence.

His heart no longer in the chase, Lamphere left the Bureau in 1955; offered a high-level job at CIA, he opted instead for the quiet backwater of the Veterans Administration and later worked for the John Hancock Life Insurance Company. Gardner fled the United States and bad memories and took up codebreaking at the British decryption center at Cheltenham. “Sasha,” meanwhile, became the resident in Washington in 1960. Lamphere died in 2002, at age 83. Gardner also died in 2002, at age 89, and two years later was inducted into NSA’s Hall of Honor.

*In the Enemy's House* is a well-written, page-turner of a book, very readable and organized into brief chapters. The quality of the writing should not be surprising given Blum’s credentials as a journalist and author. He has written several best-selling books and is a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair* and a former reporter at the *New York Times*, where he was twice nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting. This book is enough of a human interest story—focused on Lamphere and Gardner, and to a lesser extent, the spies and spymasters—to hold the interest of the average reader but is also satisfying for an Intelligence Community audience; the parallel processes of Gardner’s cryptologic research and Lamphere’s counterintelligence investigation make for especially fascinating reading.

In the category of “observations” rather than “criticisms,” readers might find the limited number of photographs—which may be at the discretion of the publisher—disappointing, especially in light of the numerous persons identified in the book. For example, there are no photos of Feklisov/“Sasha,” none of any other spy ring members besides the Rosenbergs and Harry Gold, and none of any Russian or American atomic bomb research laboratories or test sites. In light of the focus in the early portions of the book on the lives and careers of Lamphere and Gardner, the title may also cause some consternation. Does the phrase “In the Enemy’s House” refer to Russian intelligence operatives in the United States, Russian spies inside “Manhattan Program” facilities, the work of Lamphere and Gardner “inside” Russian foreign intelligence, or another possibility? Blum is to be commended, however, for not forcing an ironic similarity to today’s headlines of Russian meddling in US affairs. As he was finishing the book in 2017, he wrote, “. . . this Cold War history took on an unexpected resonance: and a chilling prescience” but he has admirably refused to overdraw the possible parallel.

In short, *In the Enemy's House* is a solid addition to Cold War literature and an especially revealing look inside the minds and often tense lives of a brilliant cryptologist and a dogged FBI counterintelligence agent as they dealt with an all-absorbing challenge of strategic significance, an important chapter in the history of Soviet and US intelligence operations.



