

Intelligence Officer's Bookshelf

Compiled and reviewed by Hayden Peake

Note to readers:

Owing to health matters, Hayden Peake was able to provide only four reviews; additional reviews were prepared by Robert W. Wallace and J. E. Leonardson (as noted below).

HISTORICAL

The First Conspiracy: The Secret Plot to Kill George Washington, by Brad Meltzer and Josh Mensch

Hall of Mirrors: Virginia Hall America's Greatest Spy of WWII, by Craig Gralley

The Millionaire Was a Soviet Mole: The Twisted Life of David Karr, by Harvey Klehr

Nuking the Moon and Other Intelligence Schemes and Military Plots Left on the Drawing Board, by Vince Houghton (Reviewed by Robert W. Wallace)

MEMOIR

Gray Day: My Undercover Mission to Expose America's First Cyberspy, by Eric O'Neill (Reviewed by J. E. Leonardson)

INTELLIGENCE ABROAD

Shadow Strike: Inside Israel's Secret Mission to Eliminate Syrian Nuclear Power, by Yaakov Katz

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

HISTORICAL

The First Conspiracy: The Secret Plot to Kill George Washington, by Brad Meltzer and Josh Mensch. (Flatiron Books, 2018) 413, endnotes, bibliography, photos, maps, index.

In his 1959 book *Turncoats, Traitors, and Heroes*, Harvard historian John Bakeless, a former Army intelligence officer, included a chapter entitled “Kidnapping George Washington.” Well documented from court-martial records, contemporary letters, and news accounts, the basic plot has never been questioned, though other historians have referred to it as a plan “to assassinate the commander-in-chief.” *The First Conspiracy* is the most detailed examination of the case to date and it seeks to determine whether the plotters were “trying to kill George Washington, kidnap him, or something else?” (x)

A brief digression is necessary here because of the book’s incongruous title. First, the subtitle of the book implies an answer to the question above, but the book does not conclude that assassination was the aim. Second, the idea that the subject of this story was “the first conspiracy” is historically mistaken, as the authors eventually add the qualification that the conspiracy was the first against the Continental government.

Chronologically, the plot takes place during the first six months of 1776, before independence was proclaimed. Meltzer and Mensch integrate several themes, adding in each case background on the principals and events not found in other accounts. The first theme is George Washington’s role as commander and his contacts with congressional committees. The second deals with the plotters and how they operated under the direction of the governor of New York colony, William Tryon. The third theme covers revelation of the plot by a jailed counterfeiter’s accomplice, Isaac Ketcham, who reported to the colonial authorities to save him-

self that at least one of the plotters, Thomas Hickey, was one of Washington’s handpicked bodyguards. The final theme addresses how Washington dealt with Hickey in a public court-martial and prompt hanging.

The authors point out anomalies so far unexplained in history. For example, why was only Hickey court-martialed when at least five bodyguards were named as suspects? Then there is the charge that Mary Smith, Washington’s housekeeper, was part of the plot. (274–77) Perhaps the most curious of all was the unexplained reference in Washington’s general order concerning the Hickey hanging that mentions “lewd women” as a causative factor. (311)

In the end, the authors find no smoking gun to allow them to conclude whether the plotters planned to kill or just kidnap Washington, but they do offer assessments of the likelihood of each alternative.

The First Conspiracy concludes with observations on the consequences of the discovery and defeat of the plot. Very important, the authors suggest, was the creation of the Committee for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies, which was headed by Washington’s colleague John Jay. (355) They add that the act established counterintelligence as a vital function, though “security” might be a more accurate characterization. Of equal value for Washington would be the staff members he selected to serve him for the rest of the war, and they are discussed briefly.

Although the narrative is occasionally over dramatic, Meltzer and Mensch have provided as complete an account of the plot as is likely to emerge.

Hall of Mirrors: Virginia Hall America's Greatest Spy of WWII, by Craig Gralley. (chrysalis-pub.com, 2019) 222 pages.

The first biography of Virginia Hall appeared in 2005. A second was published in 2019. While the basic events are the same in both, the same events are ascribed to different to characters in each book and only the second has some, though not enough, source notes. And now former CIA officer Craig Gralley has contributed a third version, based on “years of research and hundreds of historical documents” that gave him sufficient insight into his subject that he decided to write the book in Hall’s voice thus producing a “historical novel.” (viii)

This format gives Gralley creative license to mix pseudonyms and true names without letting the reader know which is which. In a variation of this option, since some names (for example, Maurice Buckmaster of SOE)

are well known, dialogue between Hall and the officer can be created that never took place. Page 5 includes an instance that nominally covers Hall’s SOE recruitment. And that is all right for a novel, but the subject is also covered in the other two biographies with different participants at different locations and times. For those wishing to know the truth about Hall’s extraordinary career *Hall of Mirrors* should not be the starting point.

In terms of sourcing, since none of the three books answer all the important, “How do they know this?” questions implicit in the narrative, a scholarly comparative analysis based on archival documents remains to be done before the truth can be established.

The Millionaire Was a Soviet Mole: The Twisted Life of David Karr, by Harvey Klehr. (Encounter Books, 2019) 260, endnotes, index.

Amerasia was a journal of Far Eastern affairs published between 1937 and 1947—not to be confused with the existing academic *Amerasia Journal*—by two Soviet agents who ran afoul of the FBI after classified OSS and State and War Department documents were found in their editorial offices. The resulting *Amerasia* Affair was the subject of the 1996 book by historians Harvey Klehr and Ronald Radosh. One of the communists Klehr came across in the course of his research for the book was David Karr, a man with intriguing credentials. According to Klehr, Karr “knew or met with every president from FDR to Gerald Ford.” (2–3) Published Soviet archives revealed that Karr was “a competent KGB source.” (157) So Klehr decided to write a book about Karr, but it had to wait until he became Andrew W. Mellon Professor Emeritus of Politics and History at Emory University. *The Millionaire Was a Soviet Mole* is the result.

The book is a biography that emphasizes the diverse professional life Karr led. Its major parts Klehr covers in separate chapters. Named David Katz at birth in

Brooklyn, New York, on 24 August 1918, he tested in high school with a genius IQ, though his academic track record was poor. His one interest was sports writing, and Klehr tells how Karr maneuvered from menial jobs to writing for *The Daily Worker*, where he came into contact with many well known communists. Those relationships stigmatized him as a communist, and though he claimed never to have joined the party, others asserted that he had. (15) In any case, Klehr shows Karr was an atypical capitalist-communist, if there was such a thing.

During WW II, Karr, who was deaf in one ear, joined the Office of War Information, which made public approved information about the war effort. He was investigated by the House Special Committee on Un-American Activities, where he claimed, falsely, that he was an FBI informant. Finding no proof he was a communist, OWI dismissed Karr for lying to the committee. Then, after a brief stint with the *Washington Post*, he went to work for columnist Drew Pearson as an often unscrupulous but aggressive investigative reporter. (41)

Klehr discovered indications that while associated with Pearson from the mid-1940s to early 1950s, Karr was also some sort of Soviet source. As was characteristic of his behavior, Karr established influential contacts. Those documented during this period include Harry Dexter White—Karr called him a friend—Larry Duggan and Duncan Lee, to name three who were later confirmed as Soviet agents. It was also at this time that Karr was linked to the *Amerasia* case and named once by NKVD officer, Vladimir Pravdin, in a Venona cable. (49) Then Senator McCarthy accused him of being “a Soviet intelligence mole.” (3) Seeking a change of scenery from anti-communist Washington, Karr became a successful public relations flack in New York, a Hollywood producer, and multi-millionaire businessman in France.

But it is in the chapter titled “Soviet Agent” that Klehr lays out his evidence that Karr became at least an agent-of-influence and a paid KGB source sometime in the early 1970s. (158) Based in Paris, Karr made his first trip to Moscow with Armand Hammer and then-presidential hopeful Sargent Shriver in 1972 and began developing new contacts.

Karr did conduct legitimate business, in Moscow, however. For example, he built the 1,777-room Kosmos, the first Western hotel constructed in Moscow since the

revolution, and he arranged high-level deals that allowed Jews to relocate to Israel. But of greater interest were the meetings he organized with Soviets and American politicians who visited Moscow in the 1970s. Besides Shriver, he worked with Senator Ted Kennedy and Senator John Tunney, facilitating contacts with the KGB. (182) Klehr describes those curious relationships that in some cases hint at Soviet interference in US elections.

David Karr’s life came to a mysterious end the night of 7 July 1979. His relations—one wife, three ex-wives, 5 children—had different opinions about the likely cause. Some thought it was a heart attack. His fourth wife suggested he was murdered by either the CIA, the KGB, Mossad, or the Mafia. (200) Klehr discusses all the options.

Those expecting *The Millionaire Was A Soviet Mole* to be a story of classic espionage for the KGB may be somewhat disappointed. Despite his links to the *Amerasia* case and other known clandestine KGB/NKVD agents, “he was not privy to American state secrets” and was no threat to the national security of the country. Klehr does establish Karr as an opportunistic, self-serving, KGB source and agent-of-influence. It was what he gleaned from bankers, businessmen, and politicians that interested the Soviets. (158) On this point, he sets the record straight.

Nuking the Moon and Other Intelligence Schemes and Military Plots Left on the Drawing Board, by Vince Houghton. (Penguin Books, 2019). 302 pages, source notes. — Reviewed by Robert W. Wallace

Nuking the Moon is fun to read, in part because most of what is described didn’t happen, at least not yet. Historian Vince Houghton has compiled an astonishing and potentially history-altering list of 21 projects involving cats, nukes, missiles, unconventional operations, weather modification, and planetary exploitation, all of which were terminated or failed, sort of.

At first look, the book appears to be a compilation of unrelated accounts of sometimes bizarre, top-secret government projects. Only at the conclusion does one sense that these are all woven together by three threads. First,

a green thread of dollars: governments fund crazy stuff with taxpayer money. Second a red thread of danger: fear and loathing of the enemy breeds extraordinarily destructive creativity. Third a silver thread of hope: in each of these instances, good judgment eventually prevailed.

“Serious” historians might find Houghton’s readable depictions of government-sponsored research with potentially existential consequences such as contaminating the moon with radioactive debris and melting cities by focusing the sun’s energy through gigantic, cosmic magnifying lens, too breezy, even cavalier. If so, the

source notes offer citations to official documents that provide supporting detail in full-throated governmentese.

Houghton concludes each chapter by asking “And then what?” and discussing the technical or scientific tail of the project. In doing so, he reminds us that all technol-

ogy, like books, has a first draft. Subsequent research and rewrites often lead to conclusions that neither the scientist nor the author envisioned. While no one nuked the moon in the 20th century, mankind’s imagination remains unrestrained for good—and otherwise.

MEMOIR

Gray Day: My Undercover Mission to Expose America’s First Cyberspy, by Eric O’Neill. (Crown, 2019), 291 pp.
—reviewed by J. E. Leonardson

One type of intelligence memoir involves books written by people with small amounts of experience or tangential connections to major cases that, in turn, they can use to advertise themselves as intelligence experts. *Gray Day*, an almost 300-page memoir by a minor figure in the FBI investigation of Robert Hanssen, falls squarely in this category. That’s a shame, because within this heavily-padded volume, a good short account struggles to get out.

Eric O’Neill was an FBI surveillance specialist who was tapped in December 2000 to work in the Hanssen investigation. This was in the late stages of the probe; Hanssen already had been identified as a Russian spy and would be arrested just two months later, in February 2001. In December, Hanssen had been given a new assignment and office in which he could be monitored. O’Neill was assigned work under Hanssen, with the job of watching his new boss. *Gray Day* is O’Neill’s account of his two months with Hanssen.

The book is at its best when O’Neill talks about Hanssen himself. He portrays Hanssen as a man who combined overbearing arrogance with a constant need to lecture and humiliate others, general unpleasantness, and—

perhaps because of the strain of his multiple lives—an explosive temper. Anyone who ever has had a bad boss can sympathize with O’Neill’s story of days filled with abuse from a man he knew to be a serial betrayer, and anyone who has had to work long, unpredictable hours will identify with O’Neill’s efforts to juggle work, law school classes, and an increasingly unhappy wife.

Unfortunately, O’Neill vastly overstates his own importance. He certainly made his contribution to the case but, contrary to the impression he gives, he was not a major character and did not provide the clinching evidence against Hanssen. Indeed, it was years of work by FBI agents and CIA officers that uncovered Hanssen and created the need for O’Neill’s role. Moreover, O’Neill pads the book with summaries (sometimes inaccurate) of well-known spy cases and a long final section on the threat of cyberespionage, against which it just so happens his company is prepared to offer its services.

A short book on what it is like to spend two months working with and watching a spy would have been a useful contribution to counterintelligence literature. Unfortunately, this overly long and self-important book is not it.

INTELLIGENCE ABROAD

Shadow Strike: Inside Israel's Secret Mission to Eliminate Syrian Nuclear Power, by Yaakov Katz. (St. Martin's Press, 2019) 306, endnotes, index.

In 1976, Iraq purchased a plutonium-producing nuclear reactor from France. In 1980, Iran attempted to destroy it but failed. Israel, convinced it was designed to make nuclear weapons, acted unilaterally and destroyed the reactor in an airstrike on 7 June 1981. The attack was widely and harshly criticized in the United States, the UN, and most nations. Israel acknowledged the operation, known as "Opera," and invoked the "Begin Doctrine," which proclaimed that military force would be used to prevent enemies from obtaining nuclear weapons. (12)

On 6 September 2007, a nuclear reactor under construction at al-Kibar in Syria was destroyed in an airstrike. Israel was responsible for this operation, too, but made no public announcement of its involvement, and this time there was no international outcry. *Shadow Strike* reveals the reasons for these differences and considers the long-term strategic implications of the raid.

According to author Yaakov Katz, former Harvard lecturer and current editor-in-chief of *The Jerusalem Post*, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert sent Mossad Director Meir Dagan to the United States in April 2007 to inform the White House that North Koreans were building the reactor in al-Kibar for Syria. Olmert then called President Bush and said, "George, I am asking you to bomb the compound." (47)

Katz explores a Mossad operation that convinced Olmert of Syria's intentions and the reasons for Olmert's request.

He then reviews the actions taken by the White House and the CIA to consider the implications for the United States and Bush's response. Of all the president's national security advisors, only Vice President Cheney thought the United States should bomb the reactor without warning. The alternative the president proposed to Olmert was to seek confirmation from the IAEA to verify al-Kibar as part of a nuclear weapons program and then notify Congress of the results. After receiving Bush's pledge of continued US secrecy, Olmert responded, "Then I will destroy the atomic reactor." (121). And that is what Israel did.

Shadow Strike describes the operational planning and the internal disputes that erupted as the risks were evaluated. Of particular interest is the concept of "the deniability zone" intended to give Syrian President Assad a basis for not retaliating and starting a war; it worked. (131, 241) Katz also considers how a strike might have affected Iran and, of more immediate concern, the North Korean reaction since US-North Korea negotiations were under way at the time. A year after the strike, although Congress was officially briefed on the operation, all other parties remained silent. Thus, North Korea was not punished for its violations of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Shadow Strike is well documented with key points relying on interviews with high-level intelligence sources in several nations. The book shows how intelligence influences decisionmaking and operations. An absorbing read and a valuable contribution.



Hayden Peake has served in the CIA's Directorates of Operations and Science and Technology. He has been compiling and writing reviews for the "Intelligence Officer's Bookshelf" since December 2002.

Robert W. Wallace is a retired senior CIA officer and author. He is with H. Keith Melton, author of *Spycraft: The Secret History of the CIA's Spytechs, from Communism to Al-Qaeda* (Plume, 2009) and *The Official CIA Manual of Trickery and Deception* (HarperCollins, 2009).

J. E. Leonardson is the penname of a CIA officer.