

# **Red Spy Queen: A Biography of Elizabeth Bentley**

## ***Intelligence In Recent Public Literature***

*By Kathryn S. Olmsted. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. 288 pages.*

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When you title a book *Red Spy Queen*, you had better deliver something lurid. Kathryn Olmsted does so in this first, scholarly biography of Soviet spy Elizabeth Bentley, whose career figured in several of the most important espionage cases of the 20th century.

The outlines of Bentley's story have long been clear. She flirted with Italian fascism after graduating from Vassar and then, during the Depression, drifted into the Communist Party and espionage. For years she met with spies in New York and Washington, occasionally stuffing her knitting bag with rolls of microfilm. The NKVD dubbed her *Umnitsa*—"Smart Girl"—and eventually tried to take over her network. Frightened and angered by her Soviet bosses, in 1945 she went to the FBI (the Bureau dubbed her "Gregory"). Eventually she testified before Congressmen and juries, attaining a celebrity status second only to Whittaker Chambers in the tribe of ex-communist witnesses.

Bentley's testimony and her 1951 memoir *Out of Bondage* provoked praise and revulsion across the political spectrum. Critics called her a neurotic liar—and worse. Defenders questioned the patriotism of her accusers.

There matters stood even before her 1963 death from cancer, and there matters remained for decades.

The public's inability to measure the truth of Bentley's testimony probably explains why we have had no biography of her before now. Hayden Peake's meticulously annotated edition of *Out of Bondage* has served in the breach, but revelations from American and former-Soviet archives over the last decade have permitted a much fuller study. Kathryn Olmsted, assistant professor of history at the University of California-Davis, spotted this opportunity and has now given us the closest we are likely to get for some time to a definitive biography of Bentley.

Prof. Olmsted carefully read the FBI files, the published revelations from Moscow in books by Allen Weintstein, Harvey Klehr, and John Earl Haynes, and the declassified Soviet intelligence cables decoded by American and British cryptologists under the VENONA program. Thanks to her, we now have the threads tied together sufficiently to explain why Bentley's charges were both substantially correct and almost entirely unsubstantiated by any positive evidence until the declassification of the VENONA cables in 1995.

The espionage campaign in which Bentley participated has to rank as one of the most formidable conspiracies ever launched on American soil. Soviet military and Party intelligence organs, with copious support from the Communist Party of the United States, penetrated many corners of America's government, military, and industrial establishments both before and during World War II. The take was enormous, ranging from gossip about New Dealers and military data to the details of the super-secret Manhattan Project to build an atomic bomb.

The sheer size and aggressiveness of this effort proved to be its greatest weakness. Couriers and case officers, like Bentley, and their supervisors (like her lover Jacob Raisin—aka Joseph Golos) had so much work that they inevitably learned far more about their agents and the entire network than was wise for proper security. When the NKGB in 1943-1944 tried to split the networks into smaller, more professionally run cells, some of the agents and their American case officers balked.

One of them, Elizabeth Bentley, was so disillusioned and angry that she took her story to the FBI in the fall of 1945, doing so in a way that both protected her from Soviet reprisals and ensured that the Bureau would welcome her as a valued defector instead of arresting her for espionage.

FBI agents used her information to mount a massive 18-month effort against the Soviet and American contacts she named. That project bored an amazing number of dry holes, however, finding innumerable hints that something had gone on, but discovering virtually no evidence that the alleged spies were actually doing anything.

Thanks to Allen Weinstein and Aleksander Vassiliev's *The Haunted Wood*, we now know that the NKGB—thanks to Kim Philby—had warned virtually all of its operatives to lie low. When the leads that Bentley provided petered out in 1948, Congressional investigators called her to Washington for public testimony that was breathlessly reported by the national media. (Reporters incongruously called her the “blonde spy queen”—she was neither blonde nor glamorous, as several reporters quickly noted!) It also led Congressmen to seek testimony from a corroborating witness, Whittaker Chambers, who then implicated Alger Hiss.

The notoriety caused another change of life for Bentley. Like Chambers, she, too, would be sued for slander by one of the men she called a communist operative, and defending her case would take years and cost her much more than money. The stress deepened her dependence on alcohol, and her amateurish efforts to market her story led her to embellish the details of her espionage. As Olmsted explains,

*She had led a most unconventional life, from the rejection of marriage to her choice of careers. She had successfully planned her defection to avoid assassination by the NKGB and imprisonment by the US government. She had recently demonstrated that she could outwit top lawyers on the witness stand. Now, her distorted portrayal of her life was one more example of her practicality and her resilience. She was shrewd enough to change her life story in a way that suited the times and her own needs.* <sup>[1]</sup>

When the inconsistencies and exaggerations in her accounts tumbled out, Bentley retreated deeper into booze and paranoia. She also realized that her imminent crack-up worried her new friends at the FBI, and she learned how to squeeze money out of the Bureau by periodically causing trouble and threatening to cause more unless they helped. Her choice in boyfriends only complicated matters—one had to be threatened by assistant US attorney Roy Cohn, and another told the press that she had privately called her autobiography a work of “fiction.” Olmsted passes a harsh judgment on Bentley:

*She had formidable survival skills, and one of those skills was her ability to lie. She lied to others and to herself . . . . At some level, though, she must have*

*doubted her own comforting stories. She used the alcohol to banish those doubts—and her inescapable guilt.* [2]

Elizabeth Bentley spent her last years as a near-recluse in rented rooms in Connecticut, teaching in a reform school for girls. She died at age 54 of an abdominal cancer that was probably exacerbated by her drinking, and only a handful of relatives and FBI agents attended her funeral. Her lonely end was little noticed in the press, and mostly welcomed there.

Professor Olmsted's weaving of public, legal, and declassified sources has given us a nearly definitive life of Elizabeth Bentley, but Olmsted could have done better at explaining the Bentley case in the context of the larger American effort against the Soviets. Indeed, a more careful reading of the FBI's history would have kept Olmsted from suggesting (on pages 67 and 93) that the Bureau had done little about Soviet spying before Bentley finally confessed in November 1945. It's a good theory, but not really true. The FBI had busted the NKVD's senior officer in the States in 1941 and, as Olmsted notes, had opened files on Golos and Bentley. Agents were surveilling Communist Party operatives by early 1943, and they led them to NKVD officers under diplomatic cover that April. The famous "Anonymous Letter" to Director J. Edgar Hoover provided many more leads in August 1943, and encouraged the FBI to keep a close eye on the communist and Soviet officials it named. Weinstein relates that information from a Soviet spy in the Justice Department, Judith Coplon (who now also has a biography of her own), convinced Moscow in October 1945 that the Americans were always listening.

The Bureau's meticulous files would come in handy when Bentley defected. That explains a quotation (related by Olmsted) from FBI agent Don Jardine: "We had files here, there, and everywhere," he noted, "and she kind of sewed it all together." [3]

Indeed she did. Bentley's clues were key to the early success of VENONA. For the Bureau, VENONA became a priceless window into Soviet espionage when it corroborated her, than rather than vice versa. It was also through Bentley that the Bureau finally realized that the Soviets had built an underground apparatus in the United States that was operating almost completely apart from the Soviet diplomats that Bureau agents had been tailing.

At least one novelist has complained that writing fiction is harder than writing history because fiction has to be plausible. Elizabeth Bentley's

career was far too improbable for fiction, which shows that the truth is often more interesting.

**Footnotes:**

[1] Red Spy Queen, p. 167.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 168.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 100

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