

# Alger Hiss's Looking-Glass Wars

## *Intelligence in Recent Public Literature*

By G. Edward White. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 297 pages.

Compiled and Reviewed by **John Ehrman**

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Somehow, the Hiss case never goes away. The basic question—whether Alger Hiss was a spy for the Soviet Union during the 1930s and 1940s—was finally settled during the 1990s, as Cold War archives opened and documents proving his guilt became available. But other issues remained uncertain. Unlike many other Soviet spies who confessed their guilt, Hiss went to his grave in 1996 claiming to be innocent; he left no record of why he had committed espionage or why he denied it publicly for almost 50 years. Now, in *Alger Hiss's Looking-Glass Wars*, G. Edward White, a law professor at the University of Virginia and son-in-law of one of Hiss's lawyers, provides a convincing analysis of Hiss's reasons.

Born in 1904, Alger Hiss graduated from Johns Hopkins University and Harvard Law School, worked as a secretary for Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, and, like many educated liberals, migrated toward the radical left during the Depression. He moved to Washington in 1933 to work in the New Deal and, after serving in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration and on the legal staff of the Nye Committee's investigation of US munitions sales during World War I, he joined the State Department in 1936. Hiss rose high at State, eventually serving as an aide to Secretary of State Stettinius at the Yalta conference in 1945 and then as Secretary General of the UN organizing conference at San Francisco.

Although it is unclear when he was recruited by the Soviets, Hiss may have been working for them as early as 1933. While at the State Department, he routinely passed documents to Whittaker Chambers, an American communist working for Soviet intelligence, who photographed them and delivered the film to the Soviets. In 1938, Chambers stopped working for Moscow and, after the announcement of the Hitler–Stalin Pact, secured an appointment with Assistant Secretary of State Adolf Berle and told him of the espionage ring's activities. At the time, however, the government was more concerned with German and Japanese threats. The FBI did not interview Chambers until 1942, and it was not until after the war that it took Chambers's story seriously enough to begin an investigation. Although the inquiry did not produce enough evidence to prove that Hiss was a spy, it raised enough questions that Hiss was forced to leave the State Department in 1946.

The case became public in August 1948 when Chambers, called before the House Un-American Activities Committee, named Hiss as a communist, although he said nothing about his espionage. Hiss denied the charge and challenged Chambers to repeat it in public, without the immunity of testimony; Chambers did so, and Hiss filed a slander suit. Chambers, in a

deposition for the suit, revealed Hiss's spying and then produced papers and microfilms of documents he said Hiss had provided. Because the statute of limitations covering espionage during the 1930s had expired, Hiss was indicted instead for lying to a grand jury when he had denied his activities. After two dramatic trials—the first ended in a hung jury—Hiss was convicted and served 44 months in federal prison.

In *Alger Hiss's Looking-Glass Wars*, White presents several factors that he judges gave Hiss a predisposition for espionage. From a financially and emotionally troubled family, Hiss practiced deception at an early age, developing impressive self-control and discipline to create a persona that belied his origins—to Hiss's associates, he seemed to be from a secure upper-class background. In addition to documenting Hiss's various deceptions, White points out that Hiss had a controlling nature and, even as a young man, enjoyed manipulating others and compartmentalizing his life. At the same time, he had an altruistic nature and was frustrated by the slow pace of social reform during the New Deal. White contends that Hiss enjoyed the intellectual challenge not only of the "details of spying, but the details of constructing a carapace of misinformation, half-truths, and lies to cover one's espionage activity." [1] His portrait of Hiss's personality is consistent with the behavior often found in spies. That he may have, in addition, seen himself as working to alleviate human suffering must have made him an easy recruit for the Soviets.

The author's main interest, however, is shedding light on why Hiss denied his espionage after he was exposed, lying continuously to his family, friends, and supporters for almost 50 years. White suggests that Hiss may initially have simply underestimated the strength of the case against him and thought he could lie his way out of trouble—a good bet, given that the State Department investigation had been inconclusive. Not expecting Chambers to have hard evidence, Hiss used what White terms a "reputational" defense—presenting himself as man of sterling character, a pillar of the establishment, in contrast to Chambers, a confessed former communist and spy. This strategy failed as the government chipped away at his denials with witnesses and physical evidence, forcing him to keep adjusting his story until he lost his credibility.

Once convicted, Hiss was determined to be vindicated. White is at his best as he charts Hiss's evolving strategy. Since he had no new evidence or legal grounds on which to build a case, he sought to shift the focus of the debate from his acts to those of others. While in jail, Hiss took on the persona of a martyr: He appeared to accept the injustice of his fate, was stoic and never complained, and gained the respect of his fellow inmates as a prisoner who never sought favors or turned informer. White details how, after his release, Hiss made these characteristics the foundation of a new public personality and recast his story as a human drama. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Hiss presented himself as an innocent victim of Cold War hysteria and the malevolence of Chambers, Richard Nixon, and FBI Director Hoover. A key part of this effort, says White, was Hiss's decision to cooperate with a sympathetic psychiatrist, Meyer Zeligs, who wrote a book portraying Chambers as a deeply disturbed man, driven to frame an almost saintly Hiss by "the shiftings of his guilt-divided, tortured sense of his own being." [2] Hiss's claims and Zeligs' book were nonsense; nonetheless, as White points out, together they gradually made Hiss a more human and sympathetic figure.

Hiss's effort paid large dividends in the late 1960s and the 1970s. The Vietnam War, social upheaval, and Watergate discredited many of the institutions of American politics and society, and especially called into question much of what had been believed about the Cold War. White shows how Hiss in this period shifted his narrative, emphasizing his claim to be the victim of a government conspiracy. To many of the disillusioned, distrustful young people in the early and

mid-1970s, his claim seemed credible. Hiss became a popular speaker on campuses. He also managed to expand his appeal beyond students—White documents that many older, prominent people who once had believed him guilty became unsure of their views. Hiss's campaign for vindication reached its peak in 1975 when Massachusetts restored his license to practice law.

Soon after, however, Hiss's campaign stalled. The crucial event was the publication of historian Allen Weinstein's book on the case, *Perjury* (1978). Exhaustively researched, the book made a damning case for Hiss's guilt—and, in its updated edition, it remains the standard account of the case. But, as White documents, Weinstein did not succeed in destroying Hiss's position. Hiss and his allies—led by *Nation* editor Victor Navasky—again changed the debate to focus on small inconsistencies and the few points where Weinstein's research was flawed. Unused to the personal attacks that Navasky and other Hiss sympathizers unleashed, Weinstein did a poor job of defending himself. As a result, Hiss was able to keep the issue confused while he pressed on with his campaign, petitioning in federal court in the late 1970s to have his conviction voided. Despite all his efforts to change the focus to personalities and allegations of government wrongdoing, however, he still could not produce any new legal evidence and lost his case.

Hiss's last gasp came in late 1992. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Hiss's lawyer, John Lowenthal, asked retired Soviet general and historian Dimitri Volkogonov to look in the Soviet archives for information about Hiss. Volkogonov did so and wrote a letter to Lowenthal stating that Hiss had not been a Soviet spy. The letter received widespread attention in the United States, and Hiss and his backers celebrated—until, a few weeks later, Volkogonov wrote another letter, stating that his search had not been thorough and that his previous statement should not have been seen as vindicating Hiss. Volkogonov's retraction turned out to be the start of a flood of bad news for Hiss and, after his death, his remaining supporters. The releases of archival materials and decrypted intelligence communications from the 1940s—particularly the Venona cables, released in 1995—ended any chance that Hiss could be exonerated. Today, only a small band of true believers, headed by Hiss's son, still tries to argue his innocence.

*Alger Hiss's Looking Glass Wars* does not reveal any new facts or evidence regarding Hiss, but the book still is an important addition to the literature of the case. White's focus on personality—grounded in thorough research—provides a useful and insightful way to look at Hiss. The book not only answers the questions about Hiss's motives for spying and denying his actions but also strips away the façade of respectability that helped Hiss obscure the facts for so long. A manipulative, secretive, and controlling figure, Hiss can now be seen as an ordinary spy, albeit one who remains more notorious than most. White, to his credit, achieves this with prose that, except for a few spots, is clear and direct, and makes for fascinating reading.

Still, one thing is lacking in the literature of the Hiss case. No one has yet written a complete "life and times" biography of Hiss, one that would be comparable in scope and depth to Sam Tanenhaus's masterful *Whittaker Chambers* (1997). Nonetheless, until someone does that, *Alger Hiss's Looking-Glass Wars* will stand as the best personality study of one America's best-known traitors.

## Footnotes

[1] White, 32.

[2] Meyer Zeligs, *Friendship and Fratricide* (New York: Viking, 1967), 236.

**John Ehrman** serves in the CIA Directorate of Intelligence. This article is unclassified in its entirety.

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