

Intelligence in Public Media

Atomic Spy: The Dark Lives of Klaus Fuchs

Nancy Thorndike Greenspan (Viking, 2020), 400 pages, plates and illustrations, abbreviations, notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Steven D.

The USSR's acquisition of the atomic bomb in 1949 was a turning point in modern history. In addition to providing Soviet dictator Josef Stalin greater ability to expand and maintain his influence across the new post-WWII international system, it introduced a nuclear edge into the nascent Cold War standoff. This development also represented a significant intelligence coup as the USSR's atomic test in 1949 was the direct result of its infiltration of the Manhattan Project during WWII. Nancy Thorndike Greenspan's book *Atomic Spy: The Dark Lives of Klaus Fuchs* provides a good introduction to this aspect of WWII/Cold War history and the intelligence success story at the center of it as she presents an uneven but generally informative reexamination of Klaus Fuchs, the Soviet Union's most important "atomic spy."

This book shows more sympathy to Fuchs and his espionage than previous works. The author establishes early on her view that Fuchs's "unwavering commitment to ideals" defined him as a person and contributed to his decision to spy for the Soviet Union. (14, 23) Instead, the author judges that British authorities deserve a significant portion of the blame for Fuchs's espionage: first, in their harsh treatment of Fuchs as an enemy alien at the start of WWII; second, in their willful ignorance of Fuchs's known communist identity, which allowed the UK to exploit his scientific brilliance; finally, in their decision to withhold these security concerns from US officials when Fuchs was assigned to the Manhattan Project, thus enabling his most lucrative espionage collection. As she phrases it, the UK played "Russian roulette" with Fuchs and "failed to tell the Americans about the bullet in the chamber." (14) Witticisms aside, the author's conclusions about Fuchs's moral convictions are unconvincing because she repeatedly touches on but fails to resolve contradictions in Fuchs's experience and decisions that challenge her depiction of the man. She also leaves notable gaps in Fuchs's history that, if explored, might have helped her resolve some of them.

Despite these limitations, the book is worth reading. The author has an effective writing style and her

depictions of Fuchs's spying contribute to a better understanding of intelligence operations in this period. Her new insights on Fuchs's personal history are also noteworthy. They do not support her final arguments that Fuchs might be reconsidered as a "hero," but they do succeed in producing a more holistic picture of Fuchs as a complex, brilliant, but ultimately flawed individual who chose to ignore "the truth" of the totalitarian dictator he was enabling. (353, 278)

The personal biography of Fuchs is the most cogent part of the book. The author presents the many forces that shaped a young Fuchs into the successful scientist and espionage agent he would become. Her use of first-person interviews with Fuchs's surviving family members, along with his own personal correspondence, contributes to the high quality. Greenspan traces how a young Fuchs and his idealistic family pay a heavy price for their political convictions in the face of Nazism's rise. The book also clearly shows how Fuchs's background as a communist on the run from Nazi authorities in the early 1930s included experiences he'd draw upon later to operate successfully as a Soviet spy in the West.

Notwithstanding this strong beginning, the primary flaws in the work become apparent when it transitions to Fuchs's arrival in the UK as a refugee from Nazism. Despite efforts to portray Fuchs as a man of "consistent" ideals, the author fails to explore some of his more interesting contradictions, such as the irony of Fuchs, the dedicated communist, turning to the capitalist West to protect him from Nazism rather than the "workers paradise" of Stalin's Soviet Union (353, 83). This is a curious omission mainly because the book gives the impression that Fuchs might have known about, or been part of, Soviet backed plans to infiltrate communists into Western governments to help hasten their collapse. Fuchs's record shows he coordinated with Soviet-linked Comintern officials just before his arrival in the UK. The author also largely avoids any in-depth analysis of Fuchs's first seven years in the UK (1933–40). Within the few pages she does offer, there is only a cursory look at Fuchs's use

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of freedoms of the “bourgeois” West to protect himself, finance his education, and nurture his scientific talent. (40, 89) The book leaves one to speculate how Fuchs reconciled such benefits of life in the West with his “revolutionary” activities on behalf of global communism. (72) Regarding these activities the book also briefly describes Fuchs’s network of communist friends in the UK and how he supported a few secret communist efforts, but the descriptions noticeably lack depth and context.

This flaw becomes most acute when the book alludes to Fuchs and his fellow UK communists debating whether Stalinism might be a “betrayal of their ideals,” but Greenspan offers no real analysis of where Fuchs stood in such discussions then or later in his career as one of Stalin’s premier spies. (83) The book has a few references to Fuchs becoming somewhat “disillusioned” with Stalin, but it never explores what disillusioned him or why it took him so long to be question a dictator who had established his totalitarian system almost 15 years before Fuchs began spying for it. (258, 283) This is problematic in a book attempting to establish Fuchs as a moral “hero.” (352)

This error becomes more noticeable when the author decides to focus attention on Fuchs’s moral indignation at the UK’s “shameful compromises” to Nazism, both before and in the early days of WWII as motivating, in part, his decision to spy for Stalin’s Soviet Union. (103) Similar to the fleeting treatment of Fuchs’s early UK period, the author briefly mentions but does not examine the cognitive dissonance of an individual outraged at the idea that the UK was too sympathetic to Nazism even as it fought a war against Hitler’s Germany but was quick to accept Stalin’s wartime alliance with Hitler (and subsequent invasion and dismemberment of Poland) as “pragmatic.” (94) Rather than explore this apparent moral contradiction, the author simply concludes that Fuchs’s reasons for supporting Stalin’s Nazi alliance had “substance.” (94)

Greenspan is not so forgiving of the UK and its wartime mistakes. Two chapters provide in-depth (and graphic) descriptions of the government’s internment of Fuchs for eight months as an enemy alien in 1940 when the UK was under threat of Nazi invasion. In these chapters the author shows how the internment experience enhanced Fuchs’s Soviet connections, hardened his support for communism, and allowed him to further discipline his emotions in order to serve “the cause.” (125)

The speed with which Fuchs returned to work upon release and methodically used his scientific brilliance and elite contacts to gain a position in the UK’s atomic

program is remarkable. The ease with which he used his new position to immediately begin passing sensitive information to Soviet intelligence is disturbing. The author conclusively shows that MI5 ignored the security threat Fuchs posed in order to ensure the UK could exploit his abilities. That MI5 then hid this information from the United States on Fuchs’s transfer to the Manhattan Project is damning. The book offers a compelling account of how these mistakes and MI5’s efforts to cover them up would haunt the MI5/FBI relationship for years after the discovery of Fuchs’s espionage.

The book’s treatment of Fuchs’s espionage in the United States is informative, showing the challenges Soviet intelligence faced in handling this unique asset. Intelligence professionals will appreciate the depictions of the intellectual Fuchs critiquing the lax tradecraft of his Soviet handlers, the difficulties these handlers faced in attempting to control an ideological asset who refused to accept money, and the anxiety of an intelligence service scrambling to locate the prized asset after he disappears for months at a time. The book’s transitioning back and forth from Fuchs’s intelligence collection to MI5 and FBI’s counterintelligence efforts to track and unmask him is well done.

Here again, however, the author shows the weakness of her overall argument by avoiding another interesting contradiction. The book convincingly depicts the difficulties British and US authorities encountered in investigating and prosecuting Fuchs because of the due process guaranteed to him as a British citizen. But as in other instances, Greenspan chooses not to contrast this process or explore Fuchs’s thinking about how his espionage patrons would have dealt with him if the situation were reversed. The author, perhaps unintentionally, draws attention to this in briefly describing how Fuchs thanked the British authorities for his “fair trial” and listened quietly as the trial judge voiced frustration that British law required him to give Fuchs a light sentence (14 years), since Fuchs’s crime was “technically” not high treason (297).

However, the opportunities the author misses in such opportunities to contrast two systems of governance ultimately help reveal a clearer image of Fuchs. The author may have hoped it to be a man of conviction following a “moral course within his soul,” but the portrait she provides of a convicted/imprisoned Fuchs reveals a remorseful individual who realized too late that he betrayed his friends and his country in support of a totalitarian dictatorship.

Greenspan asserts that Fuchs had few regrets about betraying the UK or enabling Stalinism, but she writes that in the latter stages of his spying career, Fuchs withheld sensitive information from Soviet intelligence because of “questions” he had about Stalin. Here too, she offers no insight on what those questions might have been. (265) Nor does she offer an explanation of why Fuchs abandoned the espionage relationship in the late 1940s. Considering that Stalin wanted a hydrogen bomb and Fuchs might have helped in that effort, a careful reader might deduce he had second thoughts about whether working for Stalin was leading to the “betterment of mankind” as the author claims. (352) Instead, Fuchs’s time in the UK comes to an end with the convicted spy

tearfully “pleading” to keep his British citizenship and pledging his loyalty to the UK from then on. (315)

The book would have been on firmer ground if Greenspan had considered if this reaction indicated that Fuchs in fact regretted his espionage and/or genuinely feared he might have to live in the Stalinist reality he had avoided while serving it skillfully. Nonetheless, that the author doesn’t address the issue does not undermine the impact of reading how the UK ignored these pleas and Fuchs spent the rest of his life being monitored, mistrusted, and marginalized in the communist “paradise” of East Germany. That he endured this new life while also being largely ignored by the USSR for his espionage services is an ironic but appropriate end to this story.



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