



Vince Houghton. *The Nuclear Spies: America's Atomic Intelligence Operation against Hitler and Stalin.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. 248 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-3959-0.

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Of late, America's spies, it is fair to say, have experienced happier times. Toxic and dysfunctional relations between the Donald Trump White House and the US intelligence establishment have produced a steady stream of evermore lurid and pernicious media headlines. For agencies that necessarily conduct much of their work hidden in the shadows, America's clandestine operatives, eavesdroppers, and analysts have been exposed to uncomfortable levels of scrutiny and unprecedented public censure by an administration obsessed with managing news cycles. Feelings of confusion and exasperation, bordering on open despair, have gripped hold of the Langley headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the cavernous nerve center of the National Security Agency (NSA) at Fort Meade. Implicated by the Oval Office with facilitating so-called deep state attacks on the Trump administration and with peddling "fake news" concerning Russian interference in domestic politics, a succession of American intelligence chiefs has been abruptly fired. Blind personal loyalty to the office of the president, it seems, has come to represent a more important qualification for service as the nation's director of National Intelligence (DNI) than any related experience or particular competency.[1]

Apposite to the excellent and insightful book authored by Vince Houghton, the capacity of the

US intelligence community to collect, assess, and, perhaps, most pertinently, influence the Washington policymaking process in respect of nuclear proliferation has recently occasioned considerable debate. The CIA has found itself almost diametrically at odds with the Trump administration's evaluation of the likely nuclear intentions and capabilities of North Korea and Iran. Senior intelligence officials have struggled to make their voices heard within an executive context that interprets dissent less as a useful means for validating and sharpening policy and more as evidence of unconscionable treachery perpetrated by hostile forces. In casting a fresh spotlight on an earlier episode of friction and discord between the executive and the military/intelligence community in the atomic field, Houghton's interrogation of the dawn of the nuclear age, in the 1940s, reminds us that, to a considerable degree, we have been here before.

As the Cold War threatened to turn hot under the Truman administration after 1945, officials in Washington rushed to reassure anxious Americans that their futures were safe in a nuclear world set to be dominated by the United States. Concerns surrounding developments in Soviet atomic power, Houghton notes, were routinely dismissed as overblown and fanciful. Hubristic official assessments of the capacity that America retained to

preserve an atomic monopoly were, *The Nuclear Spies* lays bare, driven more by a combination of political bluster and cultural prejudice than by a rational and informed analysis of Soviet scientific and technical capabilities. Almost eighty years on, in 2019, bureaucratic divergence on nuclear security issues led President Trump to take to social media and to decry the lack of credit that his government had garnered for “the tremendous progress we have made with North Korea.”[2] In reaching out to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, and implementing the “art of the deal,” the president bragged that the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula was now within grasp. Familiar presidential exhibitions of humility, and accompanying cries of injustice and ingratitude, stood in stark relief to the soberer assessment placed before Congress by the then DNI, Daniel R. Coats. The North Korean regime, Coats testified, regarded the retention of nuclear weapons as inextricably linked to its survival. North Korean signals on denuclearization, the DNI judged, lacked credibility and more likely constituted a rhetorical “formulation linked to past demands that include an end to US military deployments and exercises involving advanced US capabilities.”[3] Coats’s candor and reluctance to endorse the White House’s line on other intelligence-related matters, principally concerning Iran and Russia, proved to be terminal. Before the year had ended, the DNI was out of a job. Speaking truth to power, whether in 1949 or 2019, can be a precarious business.

Of course, schisms between policymakers and the US intelligence community over nuclear matters, and wider, related concerns encompassing the politicization of intelligence, are nothing new. The furor over purported Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in the wake of 9/11 was preceded by a litany of earlier, bitter, and fractious disputes centered on intelligence “failures.” The collective efforts of the CIA, NSA, National Reconnaissance Office, Defense Intelligence Agency, and State Department failed to produce forewarning of India’s nuclear test, in May 1974. Further Indian and Pak-

istani nuclear tests, over two decades later, in May 1998, were also “missed.”[4] Inquiries undertaken by the CIA in the wake of public and congressional criticisms directed at the agency’s inability to anticipate and preempt South Asia’s nuclearization revealed deficiencies, as Houghton’s book underscores, that had characterized earlier US intelligence reversals, notably, involving the Soviets’ nuclear test, in August 1949. In the case of India, the intelligence community concluded that it had erred by failing to prioritize the likelihood of an Indian test, through poor communication and coordination between its different component parts and in underestimating the political will and technical capabilities that existed in India to build the bomb.[5] Analogous intelligence failings, Houghton makes plain, were manifest decades earlier in American responses to Joseph Stalin’s atomic weapons program.

Houghton’s work makes a useful contribution to atomic history by enhancing current understanding of the origins of scientific nuclear intelligence—or the capacity of the intelligence community to detect, analyze, and communicate nuclear proliferation threats to policymakers. Building on previous studies in this field, Houghton has crafted a fast-paced and gripping account of the early triumphs, and the subsequent tragedies, of US attempts to frustrate the nuclear ambitions of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia.[6] After getting off to an uncertain and inauspicious start in the early 1940s, when the architects of US scientific intelligence struggled to establish political credibility, or acquire adequate resources, the value of its pioneering work was quickly vindicated. By 1944, having correctly ascertained that Germany’s rudimentary atomic bomb program posed no immediate threat to the Allied war effort, senior American policymakers and military leaders were, crucially, persuaded to recognize, and to account for, such findings in their strategic planning for the remainder of the conflict. Far less satisfactory was the subsequent American failure to accurately monitor the postwar Soviet atomic program and to pre-

dict its first nuclear test. After experiencing such a good war, in Houghton's assessment, US scientific intelligence swiftly fell victim to bureaucratic squabbles and budgetary pressures that left it hamstrung and unfit for purpose as another, Cold War, dawned.

A major strength of Houghton's study is the forensic detail that it employs in reaffirming that the atomic bomb was never a high priority for the Nazis, at least when compared with efforts invested in developing long-range cruise and ballistic missiles. A vivid account is provided of the specialist American scientific teams that followed the Allied armies into Italy and Germany to gather information on the German atomic project, the so-called Alsos project. The Alsos teams' focus was on appropriating European physicists, atomic materials, and precious research data, ahead of advancing Soviet armies. One especially intriguing episode highlighted by Houghton centers on the German physicist Werner Heisenberg. In December 1944, the CIA's wartime predecessor, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), sent an agent with a scientific background into neutral Switzerland to attend a lecture given by Heisenberg on his research. The agent was authorized to assassinate Heisenberg if it became apparent that the Germans were closing in on the development of the bomb. Having heard Heisenberg speak, and after managing to engineer a brief conversation with the scientist following his talk, the OSS agent concluded, rightly, that the German bomb program remained undeveloped and posed no threat to the Allies. Heisenberg's inability to deliver a breakthrough in German atomic research likely saved his life. The same, of course, cannot be said for less fortunate atomic scientists, who, in a more recent context, have found their profession to be a deadlier undertaking. Between 2010 and 2012 alone, four Iranian nuclear researchers were assassinated in operations that Teheran attributed to the Israeli intelligence service, Mossad.[7] Nuclear physics, it

seems, can be ruinous to one's health or even deadly.

Revealingly, an element of the US intelligence effort represented by the Alsos operation was also aimed, in part, at safeguarding French atomic research. The Communist politics of several of France's most prominent nuclear scientists was regarded as a significant cause for concern in Washington. Notably, the leading French physicist and Communist Party member, Frederic Joliot-Curie, was labeled as a security risk and became a prime target for Operation Harborage. Launched in the spring of 1945, this enterprise rushed Alsos teams into French cities ahead of Free French military forces, with the aim of seizing French atomic scientists, confiscating records of their research, and destroying their laboratories and experimental facilities.

If any more evidence were needed that the origins of the Cold War lay in the mutual suspicion and rancor that came to characterize an increasingly fractured Grand Alliance between the United States, Britain, and Soviet Russia, then Houghton supplies it in abundance. In the spring of 1945, as the Red Army advanced across Eastern Europe, the US Eighth Air Force dispatched over six hundred heavy bombers to destroy a German industrial plant at Oranienburg, which was associated with the production of uranium (p. 109). The mission's objective had little to do with crippling Germany's effort to build the bomb, which, by late 1944, Alsos teams roaming across Europe had established beyond any reasonable doubt was several years away, at best, from fruition. At the time, Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, was secretly briefed, on the basis of Alsos-derived intelligence, that his strategic plans for the remainder of the war could discount a German bomb. Houghton demonstrates that the Oranienburg raid was conceived and executed solely to deny the Soviets access to German atomic hardware and technical knowledge.

Houghton offers enlightening explanations as to why the successful US atomic intelligence operation that was mounted up to 1945 was followed by a subsequent failure to anticipate the Soviets' first nuclear test, some four years later. To a considerable degree, this oversight is attributed to a systemic incoherence in the bureaucratic architecture of the postwar American intelligence community. The CIA's early struggles to coordinate its work in atomic intelligence with multiple branches of the US government that retained a stake in the field, and that included the army, navy, State Department, and Atomic Energy Commission, proved to be debilitating. When set alongside the difficulty of sourcing reliable intelligence from within the Soviet Union, institutional rivalry inside the federal government materially impeded the production of timely and accurate assessments of Moscow's atomic program.

More thought-provoking still is Houghton's interrogation of the psychological and ideological frames of reference, which, he argues persuasively, inhibited American policymakers from reaching a measured and rational appreciation of the Soviet nuclear capabilities. Houghton argues that a pervasive cultural myopia blindsided Washington, whose best and brightest brains were reluctant to comprehend that Soviet science was capable of delivering a Red bomb. The misplaced belief that the Soviet Marxist system, and its adherence to doctrinaire Marxist ideology, would stifle the free thinking and innovation necessary to develop the bomb led Leslie Groves, the head of the Manhattan Project, to assure Congress that the Soviets might, in fact, prove incapable of ever developing atomic weapons. The Soviet atomic test, when it occurred, was subsequently explained away as a product of Communist espionage; an outcome facilitated by German scientists taken prisoner by the Red Army; and the failure of an open US society, and its inherently collaborative academic community, to safeguard intellectual property vital to national security.

Moreover, Houghton establishes that, when forced to confront the reality of Moscow's bomb, American policymakers evidenced a strong and almost universal sense of cultural myopia. Adopting an orientalist approach, the Soviet's triumph was ascribed by American officials to underhand and duplicitous subterfuge and explained by a willingness to run unconscionable human risks, principally in exposing its scientists and workers to excessive nuclear radiation. None of the American explanations, as Houghton underscores, adequately account for the Soviets ability to go atomic. None, tellingly, afforded appropriate weight to the intellectual accomplishments and ingenuity of Soviet science. One US physicist, Herbert York, who worked on the Manhattan Project, lamented the widespread and myopic disregard for Soviet science. A joke prevalent within the US atomic community in the immediate postwar period, York remembered, suggested that Americans need not fret about the Soviets smuggling a suitcase-sized nuclear device into New York or Washington, because first, the Soviets would need to develop the technology necessary to construct a suitcase.

In sum, *The Nuclear Spies* provides a comprehensive, lucid, and engaging account of the early history of American atomic intelligence. More importantly still, Houghton's work offers a salutary warning for contemporary policymakers. As a renewed cycle of nuclear proliferation looms and America's political leadership manifests seemingly schizophrenic responses to emergent threats in Asia and the Middle East, profitable lessons can be drawn from the nation's atomic past. One hopes that today's decision makers avoid repeating the egregious mistakes made by an early generation of officials, whose early successes, descent into hubris, and subsequent ideological and cultural parochialisms resulted in suboptimal outcomes. What is certain is that in *The Nuclear Spies*, Houghton has crafted an opportune and compelling warning from history.

Notes

[1]. Peter Nicholas and Warren P. Strobel, "Trump's Attacks on Spy Agencies Are Called a National Security Risk," *Wall Street Journal*, January 30, 2019.

[2]. Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "The Media is not giving us credit for the tremendous progress we have made with North Korea," Twitter, January 20, 2019, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1087051223310712832>.

[3]. Daniel R. Coats, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 29, 2019, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf>.

[4]. On India's nuclear program, see George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and Raj Chengappa, *Weapons of Peace: The Secret Story of India's Quest to Be a Nuclear Power* (New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India, 2000).

[5]. See Intelligence Community Staff, Post Mortem Report, *An Examination of the Intelligence Community's Performance before the Indian Nuclear Test of May 1974*, July 1974, Top Secret, Central Intelligence Agency, CIA Records Search Tool (CREST), National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD; and Director of Central Intelligence, Jeremiah News Conference, June 2, 1998, www.cia.gov.

[6]. Notably, Jeffrey T. Richelson, *Spying on the Bomb: American Nuclear Intelligence from Nazi Germany to Iran and North Korea* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006). See also, Sam Kean, *The Bastard Brigade: The True Story of the Renegade Scientists and Spies Who Sabotaged the Nazi Atomic Bomb* (New York: Little Brown, 2019).

[7]. Farnaz Fassihi and Jay Solomon, "Scientist Killing Stokes U.S. Iran Tensions," *Wall Street Journal*, January 12, 2012. See also, Tamar Meisels, "Assassination: Targeting Nuclear Scientists," *Law and Philosophy* 33, no. 2 (March 2014): 207-34.

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