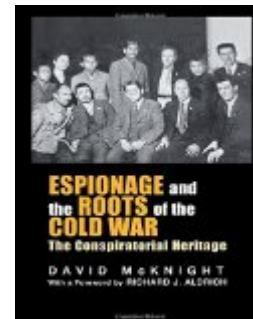


**David McKnight.** *Espionage and the Roots of the Cold War: The Conspiratorial Heritage.* London: Frank Cass, 2002. xiv + 226 pp. \$57.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7146-5163-7.



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## Communist Parties and Soviet Espionage

This book advances the thesis that the significant intelligence successes of the intelligence services of the Soviet Union in the 1930s and 1940s had their foundation in the traditions and practices of underground and conspiratorial activity of the communist parties of the west and the Communist International (Comintern). As such it is firmly in the tradition of the recent works of post-revisionist historians and political analysts such as John Lewis Gaddis, Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Ronald Radosh, as well as intelligence scholars such as Christopher Andrew, Nigel West, Allen Weinstein, Herbert Romerstein, and Jerrold and Leona Schecter. It is consistent with and makes good use of the VENONA intercepts of Soviet intelligence cables released by the U.S. National Security Agency in the 1990s, as well as documentation and testimony from former Soviet intelligence officers such as Oleg Gordievsky and Vasili Mitrokhin.

Professor McKnight teaches in the Humanities Faculty at the University of Technology in Sydney, Australia. He has studied and written about

espionage for a number of years, and his 1994 book, *Australia's Spies and Their Secrets*, won the Douglas Stewart Prize for non-fiction. For *Espionage and the Roots of the Cold War*, in addition to an impressive list of secondary sources, McKnight has done a solid job of researching primary sources. He has consulted the Comintern archives at the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Recent History (RTsKhID-NI) in Moscow, a necessary stop for modern scholars of communism. This repository was formerly the Central Party Archive of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Other valuable archives were consulted by the author including the Australian Communist Party (CPA) archives in Sydney; Shanghai Municipal Police archives in Washington, D.C.; the personal papers of J. R. Hughes, a senior Communist Australian trade unionist; and a number of memoirs of various Communists involved in clandestine work. The aforementioned VENONA intercepts were also reviewed. McKnight also interviewed a number of primarily Australian Communist Party members, and read English translations of a host of Comintern and various communist party publications,

which also served as primary source material. The author's bibliography shows diligent research and provides an excellent guide to the reader for good source material and a number of excellent books on intelligence.

A detailed analysis of the world communist movement and its relationships with Soviet espionage, from its beginning to the onset of the cold war in the late 1940s, in two hundred pages would be impossible. The author deals with this dilemma by combining broad overviews with specific examples to illustrate his main points. In the first chapter, in which he establishes his thesis of the roots of conspiracy, McKnight covers the beginnings of the Bolshevik/Communist Party, dwelling on Lenin's adoption of the Russian conspiratorial heritage from earlier conspiratorial groups, primarily the Peoples' Will (*Narodnaya Volya*). McKnight points to Lenin's 1902 pamphlet "What Is To Be Done?" and maintains that Lenin "reinvented populist conspiratorial methods and combined them with a mass orientation" (p. 28). Prior to the overthrow of the Tsar in 1917, Lenin stressed the need for underground/ clandestine work, a centralized party structure, and the use of a "repertoire of conspiratorial techniques" (p. 37). While historians might shudder at the speed with which the author races through early Bolshevik party theory, development, and practices, I found it consistent with accepted and detailed histories. As a minor objection, the author could have emphasized, in this formative period, that Lenin had been burned by a conspiracy, that of the Okhrana (the Tsarist secret service). The Okhrana secretly recruited as informants both Iakov Zhitomirsky and Roman Malinovsky, both friends of Lenin; Malinovsky was also a member of the Bolshevik Party Central Committee.[1]

The next four chapters, and the bulk of the book, deal with the conspiratorial activities of the Comintern, and its sponsorship and direction of conspiratorial activities in various national communist parties, especially those of China, Aus-

tralia, and the United States. A word is needed in advance about the phrase "conspiratorial activities," which translates from the Russian word for conspiracy, *konspiratsya*. The author astutely defines this early on as being reified in communist party organization and activities (pp. 2-4). These, as mandated by Lenin, include both "legal" and "illegal" work. The author cautions us that only some of the "illegal" activities would be considered illegal by most national laws, but they encompass a host of activities closely associated with classical espionage and covert action. Examples of these cited by the author include use of aliases and false documentation, coded messages, letter drops, front companies, compartmentation of activities, couriers and cutouts, cover stories, and covert funding. All of these practices and more are mentioned and were used both in "illegal" communist activities and classic espionage operations, which underscores McKnight's central thesis. I have a minor complaint, however, as the author scatters examples of such classical espionage activities undertaken or mandated by the Comintern throughout the book. In intelligence parlance, such activities are referred to as tradecraft and I would have liked a separate section bringing these together in one place.

The chapters on Comintern activity contain little new information, but the author makes effective use of existing works to develop his thesis (his heavy use of footnotes underscores this). His brief treatment of Osep Piatnitsky (often spelled "Piatnitsky"), the head of the secret International Liaison Department (OMS) of the Comintern Central Committee (ECCI) from 1923-1938, was tantalizing and cries out for further scholarship. (The author notes that OMS records have not been made available at the RTsKhIDNI archives [p. 11].) OMS field operatives apparently acted as *rezidents* (in Soviet intelligence terminology, a resident was the head of that organization's intelligence activities in a country), and ran espionage and covert action programs separate from mainstream Comintern activities. Both the author and

Klehr and Haynes note that Piatinitsky was involved in setting up front companies for covert funding of the U.S. Communist Party (CPUSA) and probably others.[2] It is not clear to this reader, however, whether Piatinitsky was doing this as part of his OMS duties or on behalf of some other Comintern component (he wore multiple hats as OMS chief, ECCI Presidium member, and member of the Organization Department of the ECCI). When discussing various famous Comintern representatives, for example, Richard Sorge, Gerhard Eisler, and Earl Browder, one wonders whether they represented and reported to the OMS or other bureaus of the ECCI. My major problem with these chapters is that, except for those deep into Soviet or communist history, the organization of the Comintern is not self-evident. The author needed, early on, to have provided a structured description of the Comintern. A wiring diagram, including the names of important Comintern officials, would have been extremely helpful in following the specific examples he gives of Comintern clandestine activity.

McKnight's short chapter on Comintern underground work in Western military forces contains useful, albeit very brief, new scholarship and analysis. Comintern attempts to exploit the British Invergordon Naval Mutiny of 1931 were documented. Clandestine military work largely revolved around anti-war propaganda (depending on the Soviet line at the time). The author notes the general effectiveness of British and other states' military security measures in hampering such Comintern work. More to the theme of the book, the author briefly discusses the Woolwich Arsenal case of 1938, wherein the British MI5 Security Service uncovered a Communist Party/Comintern espionage effort, on behalf of Soviet foreign intelligence (then called the NKVD, later KGB). The principal Soviet agent, Percy Glading, was previously a veteran Comintern agent. Both this case and the case of Melitta Norwood are

brief references to espionage activities detailed in other works (which the author footnotes).[3]

Comintern espionage activities in Asia, as described by the author, largely focus on events well covered by other authors, especially the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, and the Far Eastern Bureau of the Comintern and their activities in Shanghai between 1928 and 1932.[4] Here we are introduced to a number of well-known Comintern agents involved in covert activities and espionage, most notably the American communists Earl Browder (later General Secretary of the CPUSA), Charles Johnson, Margaret Undjus, James Dolson, and Charles Krumbein. Surprisingly, McKnight does not discuss, except for brief passing references, the early work of Richard Sorge, a Comintern agent in Shanghai who later ran one of the most famous Soviet Military Intelligence (GRU) networks in Japan, or of Gerhard Eisler, who went on to infamy as a Comintern agent in the United States. However, his discussion of two little-known Comintern OMS agents who were caught in Shanghai is fascinating and deserves a much lengthier treatment (pp. 119-122). These agents, known under their aliases as Mr. and Mrs. Hilaire Noulens, but with real names of Jacob Rudnik and Tatiana Moiseenko, were top OMS agents in China and headed the Comintern Far Eastern Bureau, which controlled covert funding of Far Eastern Communist parties and unions. McKnight cites a British report noting that the Far Eastern Bureau funded the Chinese Communist Party to the tune of 95,000 British pounds per year (p. 120). This Far Eastern Bureau also selected students for advanced training and education courses in the Soviet Union. While this story was touched on by Major General Willoughby in 1952, there is new material here which deserves further analysis and exegesis.[5]

The use and recruitment of national communist party members in Britain by Soviet intelligence services centers around a selection of now-familiar and well-published spy stories. In Britain,

he briefly discusses the famous "Cambridge Group" spies, Philby, Burgess, Maclean, and Blunt. [6] His section on American communists, who became spies, contains brief summaries of well-told tales involving Harry Gold, Morris and Lona Cohen, Ted Hall, Saville Sax, Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers.[7] His section on Europe also very briefly touches on the World War II-era "Red Orchestra" networks of Soviet spies in Belgium, France, and Germany as well as the "Lucy Ring" in Switzerland. While these espionage efforts do indeed reflect McKnight's central thesis of how easily communist party and Comintern conspiratorial practices segue into espionage on behalf of the Soviets, I feel he would have strengthened his point by including more detail on selected cases.

The true strength of this book is, not surprisingly, on Soviet espionage activities involving Australian communists. This part is detailed and extremely well documented, including several personal interviews with key players and effective use of the very small body of VENONA intercepts concerning Soviet intelligence in Australia, and solidly supportive of his central point. I have not had the pleasure of reading McKnight's earlier book on Australian spies and thus this was all new information for me. Of particular importance was his treatment of Wally Clayton, whom I read as a rough analog to Rudy Baker or Jacob Golos in the CPUSA; he was a dedicated, top communist party official who developed a stable of secret, loyal party informants with access to government secrets that the party was prepared to pass to Moscow. Clayton was in charge of the "illegal" activities of the party, including staffing the undercover party apparatus and running clandestine printing presses as well as running his informant network. When the Comintern was dissolved in 1943, Soviet intelligence took over the most promising of these underground information networks including Clayton's in Australia. Clayton made the transition into classic espionage without a hitch and began secretly meeting with KGB officers including Semen Makarov, the KGB *resident*

in Australia (p. 187). Clayton even produced a penetration agent of the Australian Security Service named Alfred Hughes, who became a valued KGB source. Clayton also recruited a source in the External Affairs Department who supplied secret diplomatic messages. The author does not provide a conclusion to Clayton's story and the reader must assume that the VENONA messages, when decrypted, finally tipped off the Australian Security Service in the early 1950s.

While tangential to his central thesis, the author provides a number of educational and enlightening examples of how national communist parties and Comintern efforts were sabotaged by sudden shifts in the Soviet "line." Attempts, which looked so promising in the early 1920s, to co-opt other leftist parties were blocked when the Comintern (following Moscow's orders) forbade them, terming other leftist political groups social fascists. When Stalin changed the line in 1936 and the Comintern advocated a popular front in which national communist parties would ally with other leftist groups, the national communist parties flourished, only to be devastated by the 1939 Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact dismembering Poland. In a related manner, the author provides some entertaining contradictions in Comintern and Soviet intelligence gaffes. Strict observance of tradecraft rules is always advocated by intelligence services but a number of Soviet spies and even professional intelligence officers committed numerous and sometimes incredible breaches of security, several of which the author notes.

To sum up, this book is more of an overview than a detailed analysis of specific cases, events, or communist parties. The title is rather a misnomer; while the central thesis is indeed the conspiratorial heritage of communism, the "roots of the cold war" concept is not developed at all. The bulk of the book deals with communist party and Comintern "illegal" activities. Espionage is not covered in any depth except for the Australia portions of the book. While McKnight has impressive-

ly researched this book, it adds only a little to existing literature on Soviet espionage activities. His central thesis of the conspiratorial nature of the communist parties and Comintern, which I first saw touched on in Dr. John Dziak's superb book and which was greatly expanded on by Klehr, Haynes, and Firsov, certainly deserves the deepening and emphasis McKnight's gives to it.[8] I recommend *Espionage and the Roots of the Cold War* as a starting point for those not expert in the history of Soviet intelligence activities and their use of communist party members as spies. It is very well researched and written, has impeccable sourcing, an impressive bibliography, and a well-developed central thesis. I look forward to the author writing further on the OMS and/or the Noulens case, which he introduces in this work. Based on this book, I plan to purchase McKnight's earlier book on Australian spies, which is a strong recommendation.

#### Notes

[1]. Nurit Schleifman, *Undercover Agents in the Russian Revolutionary Movement: The SR Party, 1902-1914* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1988), pp. 21, 25, 65, 68; Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 24; and John J. Dziak, *Chekisty: A History of the KGB* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1988), pp. 5-6.

[2]. Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 113-114, 130.

[3]. Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: The Inside Story* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990), pp. 178-90; and Andrew and Mitrokhin, pp. 115-116.

[4]. I recommend readers to Charles Willoughby, *Shanghai Conspiracy* (Belmont: E. P. Dutton, 1952), which deals with the Sorge spy ring but covers much of Comintern and Soviet espionage activity in Shanghai between 1928 and 1932. See also Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes,

and Fridrikh Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 42-70.

[5]. Willoughby, pp. 223-224. Willoughby identifies "Noulens" as a Swiss Communist named Paul Ruegg, most likely another alias.

[6]. Curiously, McKnight does not mention the "fifth man" of the Cambridge spies, John Cairncross. See Andrew and Gordievsky, pp. 171-74, for the exposure of Cairncross and for a much more detailed description of the recruitment and activities of the Cambridge spies.

[7]. Readers interested in this should read the definitive works of Andrew and Gordievsky, and Andrew and Mitrokhin. For the Hall and Sax story, see Joseph Albright and Marcia Kunstler, *Bombshell: The Secret Story of America's Unknown Atomic Spy Conspiracy* (New York: Times Books, 1997).

[8]. John J. Dziak, pp. 4-5; and Klehr, Haynes, and Firsov, pp. 20-70.

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