

New York University, Center for the United States and the Cold War  
Alger Hiss and History, Inaugural Conference, April 5, 2007  
Case as History Q&A with David Oshinsky, Kai Bird, Svetlana A. Chervonnaya, &  
John Prados

QUESTION: Yes, hi, my name is Jim Dingman(?). I work with the U.S. News & World Report. I have two questions. First of all, the whole question of Venona papers, how you validate them, valorize them. This is the linchpin of the arguments in the past ten years that this whole new interpretation of the Cold War is based on -- I know there's not only Alger Hiss and Harry Dexter White -- but literally dozens of people who are named in it. My freshman humanities teacher in college is part of that list. So I want to ask you how you feel about the whole issue of its validity. I've heard the Meeropols say it's disinformation; and others like Radosh and Weinstein will die defending it, and secondly, the issue of the narratives that conflict. Recently we've just had a book published on the Vietnam War by Mark Moyer that basically argues that David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan and others are responsible for eroding public opinion in the United States completely to the point that our defeat was preordained in 1962, 1963, and the narratives of this particular argument interplay with the present. So I just wanted to get your opinions on that.

BIRD: Very briefly, to try and bring together what David said and what Svetlana has said, yes, the party did have people who engaged in espionage and yet as Svetlana has shown, it's a very gray area. What was espionage? And were these people merely informants or were they --?

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BIRD: -- knowing agents? The Venona cables I think describe people in both categories. They would name some people in the open, using their real names, suggesting that they were blind sources, and then they occasionally would assign them a codename. Well, why do they assign them a codename? Maybe simply because they were becoming regular informants as such -- blind informants. The KGB officer would regularly call up X and say, let's go out and have a beer, and they would discuss politics, this is with a wartime ally at the time, during World War Two. I think it's a very gray area, and so you have to treat the Venona documents very carefully.

CHERVONNAYA: I'd add that the documents that form the basis of "The Haunted Wood" should be treated also with great caution because the Russians assigned codenames or cover names to everybody of any importance, and you can see hundreds of them. At the same time, when the 1942 orientation on the political line that I've shown today was written, there were just about six Soviet operatives working on the political line. Imagine the life of the six officers if they have two hundred-plus agents? And at the same time, each of these officers had at least two cover jobs. At least.

So it's just not possible in terms of the time frame. I've just mentioned Lauchlin Currie. An interesting fact about Lauchlin Currie was that his wife was executive secretary of Russian War Relief in Washington, DC, and Mr. Gorsky, who

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was in the United States as Anatoly Gromov, was as the local VOKS representative in charge of maintaining contact with Russian War Relief. That was his second cover job after being a press officer. That's how I found lots of his records because he reported into this particular cultural basket, and so he would have lunch with Mrs. Lauchlin Currie. This time and that time, hence the discovered records. So he reports for this lunch into one basket, and he would definitely report for the same lunch into another basket. And I would not be surprised, because I saw some of Alexander Vassiliev's notes which emerged during the London trial, and there is one note where Gorsky billed his intelligence service for -- I don't remember -- eight or eleven dollars for a lunch with Lauchlin Currie and his wife.

So I wouldn't be surprised if he would also send this bill into another basket.

I'll just say a couple of words which I had no time to say. I started from the premise that Hiss was a confidential contact of the Soviets. I made careful lists of all Soviet confidential contacts since 1927 through early 1950. So Hiss was not on that list. But, for instance, his boss at the State Department, the head of the Far Eastern Department, Stanley Hornbeck, is on this list since at least 1927 and right through 1943 or 1944. So what does it say? There is a record of another State Department boss of Alger Hiss, Francis B. Sayre -- again sharing information with the Soviets. It

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has a 1944 to 1945 record of another associate of Hiss, Leo Pasvolosky, sharing of things.

Next, I was looking for Hiss's profile. I just was crazy to find his profile by the Soviets -- because the Soviets profiled almost everybody. So I was looking for his Yalta conference profile or his San Francisco conference profile. What I discovered was a top-secret profile written by Ambassador Gromyko before the Dumbarton Oaks Conference. What does it say? It gives -- here is a record -- profiles of ten members of the U.S. delegation, and these are rather detailed profiles beginning with Stettinius and down to War and Navy Department generals and admirals, who Gromyko said were "intelligence;" and then he says that the other members of the delegation "are unknown to me." Please keep in mind that Gromyko was terribly knowledgeable. We see him in the record as privy to many intelligence secrets since 1939. This is in the record, in open archives.

So imagine that Alger Hiss is such an important Soviet agent and Gromyko is profiling the American delegation, and he says that "Those two are American intelligence agents, but I don't know about the rest." This would be abnormal. When looking at the files, you are looking for things that are normal and things that are abnormal. For example, I expected to find some record of the Pumpkin Papers -- somewhere in the files. So what do I find instead? Instead I find other type of

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intelligence, like the Kiplinger letters, for instance, coming from other sources, which are beyond the limits of this discussion. And surprisingly, I find documents which prove that the most “damning” of the Pumpkin Papers are simply improbable as any intelligence evidence.

Part of this proof I found in Moscow, however another part I found at the National Archives in in College Park. So this is a very mixed thing. It’s like a Pandora’s box, I’d say. You expect to find a confidential agent, relying on some oral - - because you know old guys when they’re in their advanced age, they sometimes tell tales. Like you pursue the plot of tales, and it turns totally different.

PRADOS: To take it back to the original question of the use of Venona. I believe that the Venona source material has to be used with extreme caution because of a number of the factors I talked about, the record that we have access to represents a very tiny element of the existing universe. The record that we actually have represents almost entirely one segment of the Russian project here and not necessarily the one that the Russian attributed the most importance to, that is, KGB New York versus KGB Washington, and the questions of identification which obviously you see are very contentious.

OSHINSKY: Thanks, John. We have time for a couple more questions. Yes, sir?

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QUESTION: I'm Simon Davis. Have you looked at Foote's work in the Office of Lend-Lease Administration? Because 1941 seems a critical date. The American award of lend-lease to the Soviet Union after Barbarossa, and getting a sleeper as an inside man on key decisions, ... that relates mainly to the British shows that there were critical arguments over who to give more lend-lease to. The British in the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern theater versus priority for military materials and economic support for the Soviet war effort, and is there any evidence to show that Foote within the Lend-Lease working closely to Stettinius had any influence in shading decisions over the allocation of lend-lease to the Soviet Union as an ally fighting against Germany rather than necessarily providing political or other high-grade intelligence and acting as an agent of influence in that way?

CHERVONNAYA: At this point, I can only say one thing. Among reports which had once landed in Russian diplomatic files, I discovered at least two 1943 reports – which would be very, I would say, important for the Soviets -- and they came from inside the Lend-Lease Administration. One report was tremendously important – it was reported to Moscow by Gromyko himself (It was just two days before the beginning of the famous Kursk battle when the Soviet resources were strained) – who says that there is information that maybe we will not be made to pay back lend-lease

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loans. That was tremendously important when the Soviets were pulling all their forces at Kursk and Orel.

PRADOS: You mean the Soviets were being told that they wouldn't probably have to pay back --

CHERVONNAYA: They wouldn't have to pay back. And this is information of tremendous importance. This comes from the Russian diplomatic files. In one of my documentaries I tell a story of how the Soviets needed lend-lease more badly than anything else. In some stories that appeared on the U.S. side, Harry Hopkins is described as a person who somehow had helped the Soviets in some special way. The document which I've shown today closes the door on any speculations around Harry Hopkins's role as a Soviet agent, because it says that the Soviets' "only hope ... is attraction of a secretary of Harry Hopkins," someone who as of this writing is "even a paler lead" than "Page."

BIRD: We also do know that Foote not only was close to Stettinius. He was the closest aide to Stettinius. He was always there. He wrote his speeches. He had access to all the information that Stettinius had.

CHERVONNAYA: And he wrote the book -- he ghosted Stettinius's book.

BIRD: He wrote Stettinius's book on lend-lease. At Yalta, he was sitting right behind Stettinius writing in a black notebook taking notes.

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CHERVONNAYA: A couple of documents that turned up in the Russian files do give some evidence that there was some passing of confidential information directly from Secretary Stettinius's Office. For instance, you see a cover letter typed on a regular office typewriter -- followed by an official text; and next you see an untitled draft obviously typed on a different "portable" typewriter with some handwritten editing, and the draft is quite sensitive. Or you see a memo coming to Gromyko from Stettinius's office in an official way -- with a few additional lines typed in, single-spaced, at the very bottom of the last page -- and this is military information. Such finds let me think that here we have some glimpse of a situation of a back channel -- and this is a thing the Soviets would decorate for, but in a very quiet way.

To repeat, ... our files do have some papers that landed in some quite regular way from Stettinius's Office. As to the 1930s, that's still my guess -- I sometimes have hunches -- but I see one avenue through which Foote might have come the Soviets' way back in the 1930s, and exactly because he was a journalist. But it's a long story, and it still has to be documented.

OSHINSKY: I guess we have time for a couple more. Yes? I think you were first.

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QUESTION [SUSAN BUTLER]: I want to commend all the researchers on Wilder Foote. I think it's very promising and it's very exciting. I just want to say one thing about "The Haunted Wood," which is that I interviewed Alexander Vassiliev, and he told me that the insertion of Hiss's name in the parentheses for the codename was not of his doing and he didn't approve of it. He only gave Weinstein the material and then he never saw the book until it was in its completed form, but I also have a question, and that is, for me it seems to be a very interesting fact that Chambers does not exist in Soviet files. Everybody else exists, and here we have the super-spy that has ruined the Hisses's family life, and he's never mentioned. Would either one of you like to discuss that?

If he was a spy, why doesn't he exist?

CHERVONNAYA: No, he's mentioned in one of the documents we now have in Vassiliev's notes.

QUESTION [SUSAN BUTLER]: Not really, but not as a --

CHERVONNAYA: Not really. We see Karl in two copies of documents made by Alexander Vassiliev which were presented at the London trial. One is the so-called "Gorsky list," and for anyone interested in it, please go to the Alger Hiss website and it is posted there with lots of comments -- where you may read about it. And there is another document which actually is this March 5 cable which says that

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ALES was in Mexico. It has some defects. That is its scan, which was done with a defect. We do not see one or two lines on top of one page, but still we see a fragment of a phrase with the Russian word for “that” – russian has genders, and here we see a word in feminine gender, “kortoraja,” suggesting that one missing word might be “group.” This most likely reads that ALES used to work with some group that was connected with the neighbors – before a loss of contact with “Karl.”

So actually “Karl” is mentioned twice: here and on the “Gorsky list.” But again, this is a very mixed bag — and it’s too long a thing to explain, hence I’ll again refer you to the Alger Hiss website. For it is still an open question as to how Gorsky could learn in Moscow in late 1949 about the things from the 1930s — and obviously without a direct access to a GRU file.

OSHINSKY: I just don’t want to let the first part go unnoticed. Vassiliev is also on record as saying: “Alger Hiss spied for us, Ted Hall spied for us, Julius Rosenberg spied for us. I consider them to be heroes. It’s up to you to make your own judgement on that point.”

CHERVONNAYA: Yes.

OSHINSKY: Vassiliev.

CHERVONNAYA: It was in a TV documentary. I was a Russian field producer on that documentary.

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OSHINSKY: Congratulations. Very good. One more, yes?

QUESTION: Could I have one more, please?

OSHINSKY: Sure, I think she was first, and then we'll get to you.

QUESTION: I wanted to say very quickly your comment, John, about GRU, the Venona not representing GRU messages. That one message that was sent by Pavel Mikhailov in September of 1943, in New York, he actually ran the GRU for all of North America, and that's the message which I think is very crucial, where he refers to a man named Hiss in the State Department and clearly if Hiss was working for the GRU, Mr. Mikhailov would have known that. Second, just a quick question, in the ALES telegram, 1822, they mention ALES working to providing military information, working with a group consisting mainly of his relatives or family. Did you look at all into how that would relate to Wilder Foote?

BIRD: Very quickly, we found that Wilder Foote did have several relatives in government service, including a cousin, whose name he gave as a reference on his 1941 employment application. The Foote family is a large family and we actually did a genealogy and went into the National Archives and looked up, did a name search from their index files for any Footes, and there are numerous Footes. There was a Foote who was an admiral at the time, there are numerous Footes who were military officers, but we couldn't establish that any of these Footes were close relatives of

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Wilder Foote, and so again, that's another avenue of research, but to our mind if you  
look at Hiss as a candidate, he doesn't fit that particular profile either.

OSHINSKY: Final question, sir, yes?

QUESTION [HENRY FONER]: My name is Henry Foner(?), and I am  
reluctant to let this session go by without some comment on what the Chairman said  
about the nature of the Communist Party which gives the impression that its major  
activity during the period --

OSHINSKY: I did not say its major activity. We were talking about  
espionage.

QUESTION [HENRY FONER]: Oh, okay, because I think it should be clear  
that there were -- John L. Lewis had no reluctance to --

OSHINSKY: I have no argument with you there whatsoever. And I  
appreciate it. I was talking about espionage. The Communist Party is a big  
complicated organization. We were doing warts and all. But I fully understand.

CHERVONNAYA: I did a very thorough reading of Communist Party files,  
which also did not support that the Communist Party was an espionage organization.  
Moreover, many people who were charged with espionage -- well, it turns out to be  
not quite what is said. Actually, on close reading, what has been described as a

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Communist Party “underground,” turns out to be a misrepresentation. All this takes a  
more careful reading of the archives.

OSHINSKY: Thank you very much for coming.