

New York University, Center for the United States and the Cold War
Alger Hiss and History, Inaugural Conference, April 5, 2007
Kai Bird (co-author *American Prometheus: The Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*),
“Who Was ALES?”

KAI BIRD: I’m going to be trying to show you some pictures and read my notes at the same time.

OSHINSKY: Do you want me to get out of the way here?

BIRD: No, I think you’re fine, David.

OSHINSKY: Okay.

BIRD: It’s a real pleasure to be here. I have tried all my life actually to stay as far from the Alger Hiss case as I can possibly get. When I first met Victor Navasky, I was a twenty-seven year old assistant editor part-time at “The Nation” when he walked in to take charge of the magazine in 1978, and I quickly realized that this was something, it was a black hole of evidence and controversy that I didn’t understand and I would leave it to Victor, but as Victor has explained to you this morning, it’s a compelling case, and I have willy-nilly been drawn into it. This particular essay that Svetlana and I have worked on was actually I have to say ironically initiated I think by Allen Weinstein because I attended a Cold War conference in the summer of 1999 and couldn’t resist when Weinstein appeared to give a talk in part about Hiss and the Cold War.

I asked him, with regard to the ALES or “A-les” (two syllables) spy case, whether he or if he knew anyone else had taken the trouble to look at the 108 Americans from the President’s party that are identified in the foreign relations volume of the United States on the Yalta conference, on the 108 Americans who actually attended the conference and whether any of

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those represented possible alternative candidates for ALES. (Altogether, some 456 Americans attended the conference.) He was very unhappy with the question and nevertheless admitted that that would be a good project; and so here we are, eight years later. I teamed up with Svetlana who is a relentless researcher. She knows the American archives better than most American historians that I know, including myself, and it's been a real pleasure to work with her. The result is an 18,000-word essay that has 184 footnotes and we've persuaded “The American Scholar” to post it online. At that length, it's too long to even be put in a print journal, and it's a complicated story, and I have only less than twenty minutes now to explain it.

First of all, we're going to be dissecting two cables, both written by a man named Gorsky who is pictured here on the right, who is the NKGB agent stationed in the Soviet Embassy in Washington, DC in 1945. The first cable is the March 30th, 1945, it's known as the Venona 1822 Cable, and it contains a crucial clue to this man ALES.

And I'm going to read that crucial paragraph. “Recently ALES and his whole group were awarded Soviet decorations. After the Yalta Conference already in Moscow, ALES was allegedly contacted by a very important Soviet official. ALES gave to understand that it was Comrade Vyshinsky, the Deputy Foreign Minister, and on instruction of military neighbors, passed onto him their gratitude and so on. Vadim.” Vadim is the codename for Gorsky pictured here.

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Recently, courtesy of Alexander Vassiliev, who was Weinstein’s co-author of “The Haunted Wood,” he took notes of a March 5th cable, and we’ve reproduced his notes in full in our paper, and the key clue there was, “That ALES was at Yalta, then Mexico City and has not come back.” Now recall the date of this is March 5th. So Gorsky believes that ALES is still in Mexico City and has not come back. I particularly spent weeks and weeks in the National Archives in College Park trying to track where Alger Hiss was from the time of Yalta through March 5th, and indeed, we found a papertrail that showed where he was almost every one of those days, and in fact, Hiss came back on February 22nd to Washington, DC, leaving Stettinius back in Mexico City at this international conference. He suddenly came down with the flu, he was sick for a few days, but he continued calling into his office, and the reason he came back early was that he was the key player on trying to organize the San Francisco conference to found the U.N. and there was a crisis brewing, a crisis over which countries would be the official inviting parties to the San Francisco Conference. And at Yalta, Stettinius made it clear to Gromyko and other Soviet officials that Hiss was going to be the key man, their point man on this issue of the invitations.

And the invitations list was delayed repeatedly. Finally, we know on Saturday, March 3rd, Hiss gave a live radio interview on NBC nationwide hosted as a moderator with Archibald MacLeish. The next day “The Washington Star” and “The New York Times” reported about this radio interview, and Gorsky, who’s cover in the Soviet Embassy in Washington was as a press

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officer, that was his day job, his night job was reporting back to the NKGB -- would have realized that he was in plain view. And this picture is a document in Russian that establishes that Gorsky's job was as press officer for the Embassy. We also know that on March 5th, that Monday, the Monday after the Saturday where Hiss was on national radio, early that morning, Acting Secretary of State, Joseph Grew, telephoned the Soviet Ambassador, Andrei Gromyko, to inform him that there was soon going to be a radio and press conference at the State Department where the U.S. was going to announce who was going to be invited, and this was of key interest to Gromyko. We're sure that he would have delegated someone from the Embassy to go and cover the conference, and possibly even Gorsky himself.

All of this we argue suggests that Hiss was in plain view. He was not only back early but he was in plain view for the Soviets who knew who he was, and if Gorsky believed that Hiss was ALES, he would not have written the cable that night to Moscow that ALES was unavailable because he was still in Mexico City.

We then spent weeks – if not months -- trying to collate lists of all of the Americans who might possibly have attended Yalta, gone to Moscow, gone to Mexico City, gone to San Francisco. We were looking for -- we didn't rule out anyone. We were looking for secretaries, translators. We compiled dozens of lists and made a spreadsheet of them, and there were over 450 Americans who attended at least one of these four venues, Yalta, Moscow, Mexico City, or

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San Francisco. However in the end, it boiled down to only nine who actually were in Yalta, at the conference, and then went to Moscow.

I'm going to read the list of the nine here. These include the Secretary of State, Edward Stettinius, his military aide and medical doctor, Major Terence Tyson, Alger Hiss, H. Freeman Matthews, Wilder Foote, Edward Flynn, Lee Blanchard, George Conn, Ralph Graham. ALES must have been one of these men.

I don't have time to explain how we ruled out some of them, but Stettinius was impossible because ALES is described later as an assistant to the Secretary of State, and it's incredible that Stettinius could have been ALES in any case. There were three young assistants - - Blanchard, Graham and Conn - two of whom probably looked too young to have been ALES. And the other men on the list either stayed on in Moscow (Flynn) or flew back from Mexico City with Alger Hiss (Matthews) or didn't quite fit the profile (Tyson). In the end, we were left with just one man standing.

His name is Wilder Foote. He was thirty-nine years old. He was then the assistant to the Secretary of State for drafting. And this title is of interest because in 1945, of course, we know that Igor Gouzenko named to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and then to the FBI, that he had known (as John has mentioned and others) that there was an agent who was an assistant to an Assistant Secretary of State or an assistant to the Secretary. He phrased it in both ways, or the

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FBI or the Canadian Mounted Police misunderstood what he was saying, but in any case, it came down to an assistant.

This is of note because Hiss had never been an Assistant to the Secretary. In 1944-45, he did not have the word “assistant” in his title, and critically the Soviet documents all describe him by his real job title in 1944, 1945, as a Deputy Director of the Office of Special Political Affairs in the State Department.

Coming back to Foote. Foote was a Harvard graduate of 1927. He graduated, then immediately traveled abroad to London and Vienna. He came back in 1928, married, and then was a journalist in Boston for a couple of years, and then in 1931, moved to Middlebury, Vermont, bought three weekly country newspapers. The papers are very interesting. He’s obviously a New Deal proponent, a liberal New Dealer in his editorial writings. He’s a very good writer, very cultivated, and he spends 10 years there.

In 1941, in the fall of ‘41, he applies for his first Federal job in Washington and the job he applies for is quite interesting: he wanted a job in the OCI -- the Office of Coordinator of Information -- which was just formed, had just been announced, in the summer of ‘41, and of course, this is the organization that is headed by Bill Donovan for a time, and is the precursor of the OSS and then the CIA. It’s an intelligence organization.

Prior to his job application for the OCI in June of 1941, the first investigation of Wilder Foote was opened. This is the first time the FBI begins to look at Foote. In the event, Foote

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does not get that job and instead he goes to the Office of War Information where he expresses an interest in lend-lease and he quickly becomes the liaison officer for OWI to lend-lease issues.

He's also the liaison to the nation's OSS and in this capacity he quickly becomes an aide to Edward Stettinius who's working on lend-lease issues and as such, he has a high classification clearance and he has access to military information.

How much more time do I have?

: You have about nine minutes.

Okay. Moving along, coming back to Yalta, one thing we discovered that was kind of peculiar and curious to us was -- you recall that the 1822 Venona cable claims that ALES was awarded a decoration and they gave him their gratitude for his service. In tracking both Alger Hiss and Foote and their movements from Yalta to Moscow and what happened in Moscow -- they were only there for like a day-and-a-half, almost two days in Moscow -- the most likely period in which this gratitude could have been conveyed occurred on the evening of February 13th, when the entire American delegation was invited to see a production of Swan Lake at the Bolshoi Ballet, and key members of the delegation were invited into the Bolshoi central box, which was a very large affair, very elaborate, ornate, and we found the protocol list for who was to be admitted into the box.

Now this may sound a little like the detective story, but it was a typewritten list and then a name was added at the last minute hand-written to the bottom of the Russian part of list, and

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the name was a man named Mil'sky. Now Mil'sky turns out to be Colonel Mikhail Milstein, who was a veteran GRU officer who had been stationed in New York in 1935 to 1938, was fluent in English. He was GRU. He in fact was the perfect man to convey the GRU's gratitude to ALES. And his name turned up exactly opposite Foote's on the U.S. list. Moreover, it turned out that Foote's name was a last-minute, penciled-in addition earlier that day to the protocol list of guests at a breakfast given by Vyshinsky. Once on breakfast list, Foote's name also traveled onto the box list.

We thought this was the clincher. Why at the last minute would Milstein's name be added and giving him access to the Bolshoi central box? There was a reception area where you could help yourself to food. It was a formal place, and yet intimate enough in which a casual conversation could be carried on between Milstein and whoever was ALES.

So coming back to Foote very quickly, who was this man? Well, his father and grandfather were both graduates of Harvard. Unitarian theologians, very prominent. Foote himself -- Wilder Foote -- was as I said a 1927 graduate of Harvard. These were all sort of liberal New Dealers.

When we had -- Wilder Foote as sort of the last man standing, we went back into the archives and tried to find any documents we could about what he was doing with lend-lease and such, and suddenly I stumbled across the fact -- I'm going to blame this on me, not on Svetlana, for outing a Soviet asset as such -- perhaps, I stumbled upon some documents that showed that

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later after the War, the FBI suspected that Foote was a communist, and they opened an investigation of him. This began in 1945 after Foote had left the State Department and had joined first the U.S. Mission to the United Nations and then became an international civil servant at the United Nations Secretariat, and Republican senators in 1952, as part of the McCarthy wave, charged at one point that a group of high-level State Department officials who were suspected of Leftwing affiliations were allowed to leave the Department in 1946 or so, and shifted to the United Nations.

So we found this suggestion that there was this investigation -- one minute -- and so I stopped our work and I filed a FOIA request to the FBI for Foote's file. We waited ten months, finally got it, and resumed our research. The Foote file is 370 pages, and ironically, after Svetlana came, just a few weeks ago, to do a little more research in the National Archives, she's so good, she found within two days many of the same reports in that FBI file completely uncensored, while the version that I got was highly marked, blacked-out. So now in our paper, we have not only the 370 pages -- show it.

SVETLANA CHERVONNAYA: Let's show it beginning with the envelope it was in. Next is the record of this public press conference on the morning of March 5. We showed that it was broadcast over the radio and that Alger Hiss was the major person who was fielding the questions. And so the Soviets would definitely be in attendance, and if Gorsky was not, he would be sitting at the radio at his press office at the Embassy. So there is no doubt, he knew

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whether Alger Hiss was back. And this is Hiss’s file, also discovered, a similar type of file, discovered at the National Archives which was just 13 pages, and very obviously, searched-through to deliver some good stuff to Chambers. I say this because it displays FBI writing — “for Chambers” — on two pages -- saying someone should show these pages to Chambers, and the dating was just December 1948 -- that’s what it was about.

BIRD: I’ve got to wrap it up here. I’m going to steal a couple of minutes of Svetlana’s time to get to my conclusion. There are other -- there’s other gossip in the Foote FBI files. It’s a typical FBI file filled with stuff that doesn’t prove anything. Leftwing connections, possibly he employed a member of the Communist Party at his newspaper in Vermont, someone who’d been expelled from Middlebury College for communist affiliations. It doesn’t prove anything. However, the FBI did find several intriguing links between Foote and the Amerasia case. It also intriguingly found a slender link to Victor Perlo and Gregory Silvermaster but nothing definitive, nothing that they could follow up.

In sum, there were numerous investigations by the Civil Service Commission, the State Department Security Board and then FBI in 1941, 1944, 1945, 1946, 1948, 1949 and then this big one in 1950-1953, where we got the file for it. And they could not produce anything actionable. Foote, if he was ALES, escaped and retired in 1960, and the only other thing I want to add is to explain or to assert how little we know. We think Wilder Foote is the only man left

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standing who is a candidate for being ALES because he fits the itinerary, but we really don't know who Foote was, and we don't know what ALES -- Foote -- did for the Soviets.

Our task here, I want to conclude, has been to reopen the case of ALES and clearly our most important finding is that a close examination of the archival evidence strongly exonerates Alger Hiss of being labeled with the codename ALES. This does not address the allegations made by Whittaker Chambers pertaining to the 1930s, but Hiss should no longer be considered a credible candidate for being ALES. Our foray into the archives has shown that Hiss has an alibi. He was not in Mexico City on March 5th, 1945, but in plain sight of ALES' Soviet diplomats in Washington, DC. Another man fits the known clues far more closely than Alger Hiss or any of the other potential candidates, all of whom seem to have now been eliminated. The archival record also shows that the search for ALES as we can now see was prematurely terminated and that this search has now finally been resumed.

So I think there's much more work to be done. We've opened up a new avenue of investigation, and I invite historians who believe in Hiss's innocence and those who believe in his guilt to pay attention to this evidence seriously and take it forward.

Thank you.