

I.F. Stone, Soviet Agent— Case Closed

What KGB archives reveal about
a garlanded journalist of the Left.

By John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Alexander Vassiliev

WHEN NEW information about Americans who had cooperated with the Soviet KGB began to emerge in the 1990s, no individual case generated as much controversy as that of the journalist I.F. Stone, who had long been installed in the pantheon of left-wing heroes as a symbol of rectitude and a teller of truth to power before his death in 1989. Charges about Stone's connections with the KGB have been swirling about for more than a decade, prompting cries of outrage among his passionate followers. Until now, the evidence was equivocal and subject to different interpretations. No longer.

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In the early 1990s, one of us—Alexander Vassiliev, a former KGB officer turned Russian journalist—was given authorized access to the files of the SVR (the successor spy agency to the KGB in Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union) to pursue research for a book that was eventually published in 1998 under the title *The Haunted Wood*.^{*} By the time of publication, Vassiliev, fearing retribution from hard-line Communists and nationalists angered by revelations of secrets, had moved permanently to Great Britain. He left his original notebooks, containing more than 1,100 pages of detailed notes and lengthy quotations, with friends in Moscow. They were filled with details about people and issues that did not fit the parameters of *The Haunted Wood* or whose significance Vassiliev did not then realize.

RETRIEVED by Vassiliev in 2002, the notebooks offer the most complete look at Soviet espionage in America we have yet had or will obtain until the likely far-off day when Russian authorities open the KGB's archives for independent research, eclipsing even the several thousand KGB cables partially

^{*} Vassiliev's co-author was Allen Weinstein.

decoded by the U.S. National Security Agency in the Venona project and released in 1995. They are the basis for our new book, *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America*.† And they provide startling new evidence about Stone's ties to Soviet intelligence.

BORN ISIDOR FEINSTEIN in Philadelphia in 1907 to Jewish immigrants from Russia, Stone dropped out of the University of Pennsylvania to become a journalist. After several years as the youngest editorial writer for a major metropolitan newspaper, the *Philadelphia Record*, he moved to the *New York Post* with instructions from its owner, J. David Stern, to transform the paper into a champion of New Deal liberalism. Stone was, however, more than just a New Deal liberal. His sympathy for Soviet communism was obvious. In June 1933, he declared that a "Soviet America" was "the one way out that could make a real difference to the working classes" and insisted that FDR's New Deal was not reforming America but leading it to fascism, a view that then reflected the position of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA).

In New York, Stone also became a contributor to the Soviet-aligned *Nation* and *New Republic*. He was a presence in the Popular Front, an effort by the CPUSA to make common cause with other left-wing groups. Although Stone had briefly been a member of the Socialist Party in the early 1930s, he soon had a reputation as a fervent pro-Communist, although he never joined the CPUSA. His biographer, Myra MacPherson, later conceded that Stone had possessed a romantic view of Communism and viewed "party members as lined up on the correct side of historical developments, unlike fascists or even members of the smaller left-wing sects." While occasionally critical of aspects of Stalin's purges, Stone felt that because of the battle against fascism, it was too important to risk fracturing the Popular Front by openly denouncing Stalin or the Soviet Union. He was a signer of the statement, published just days before the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939, defending the USSR and its progress toward democracy and denying it shared any commonalities with Nazi Germany.

After Stern finally fired him from the *Post* for his excessively pro-Soviet views, Stone moved to the *Nation*. Briefly shaken by the Nazi-Soviet Pact, he momentarily pulled back from his Communist alliances, writing an angry denunciation of the agreement and

taking part in a short-lived effort by several other disillusioned members of the Popular Front and former Communists to build a new radical group critical of the American Communist Party's role as a tool of Soviet foreign policy.

In 1940 he moved to *PM*, the left-wing New York daily. There, he reverted to his earlier attitudes and became a stalwart of the paper's pro-Communist faction. His uncritical support of Soviet and Communist policies continued until the Stalin era came to an end with the dictator's death in 1953. A year earlier, Stone wrote *The Hidden History of the Korean War*, in which he promoted the falsehood that South Korea had sparked the war by invading the Communist North. A few years after *PM* folded in 1948, Stone created his own muckraking newsletter, *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, which gained a wide audience on the Left. Although he was occasionally critical of aspects of Soviet policy, it was not until the mid-1950s that he lost his illusions about the Soviet regime, writing a denunciation that cost his newsletter a substantial portion of its readership.

In the 1960s, Stone's angry condemnation of American foreign policy found a receptive audience among both the old pro-Soviet left and the younger New Left. Stone learned classical Greek in his retirement and wrote a book on Socrates and Athens, part of his lifelong obsession with issues of dissent. When he died in 1989, his reputation as a fiercely independent curmudgeon seemed secure.

THE FIRST REPORT of Stone's possible ties to the KGB came in 1992, when Oleg Kalugin, a retired KGB general, told a British journalist, "We had an agent—a well-known American journalist—with a good reputation, who severed his ties with us after 1956. I myself convinced him to resume them. But in 1968, after the invasion of Czechoslovakia . . . he said he would never again take any money from us."

Herbert Romerstein, a former staff member of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, quoted an unidentified KGB source as saying that the journalist in question was Stone. The British journalist then interviewed Kalugin again, and he admitted that he had been referring to Stone but denied that Stone was a controlled agent. In a 1994 autobiography, Kalugin characterized Stone as a fellow traveler (someone with Communist Party beliefs but not membership) "who had made no secret of his admiration for the Soviet system" before the mid-1950s. When he was asked to reestablish contact with Stone, Kalugin wrote, KGB headquarters in Moscow "never said that [Stone] had been an agent of our intelligence service, but rather

† They will soon be available at the Library of Congress, and scans of the notebooks and translations will be accessible on the website of the Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson Center.

While Stone earned a good living, the message from KGB officer Viktor Pravdin to his Moscow bosses said, “he would not be averse to having a supplementary income.”

that he was a man with whom we had regular contact.”

Kalugin’s careful parsing of Stone’s precise relationship to the KGB and the hints he offered of an earlier relationship with Soviet intelligence made the discovery of Stone-related materials in the KGB cables deciphered by the Venona project in the mid-1990s the occasion for an uproar. Four cables mentioned Stone. Two were entirely benign. A 1943 message from the GRU, or Soviet military intelligence, merely reported that someone with GRU connections had been in Washington and talked with several correspondents, including Stone. A KGB message dated December 1944 mentioned Stone along with several other journalists who had contacts with military leaders.

The other two, both from 1944, were more suggestive. On September 13, the KGB New York station sent a message to Moscow that Vladimir Pravdin, a KGB officer working under cover as a correspondent for TASS, the Soviet news agency, had been trying to contact “Pancake” in Washington, but that Pancake had been refusing to meet, citing a busy schedule. Samuel Krafzur, an American KGB agent code-named “Ide” who worked for TASS in the building that housed Stone’s office, had tried to “sound him out but Pancake did not react.” An October 23 message then reported that Pravdin had succeeded in meeting with Stone:

P. [Pancake/Stone] said that he had noticed our attempts to contact him, particularly the attempts of Ide [Krafzur] and of people of the Trust [USSR Embassy], but he had reacted negatively fearing the consequences. At the same time he implied that the attempts at rapprochement had been made with insufficient caution and by people who were insufficiently responsible. To Sergey’s [Pravdin’s] reply that naturally we did not want to subject him to unpleasant complications, Pancake gave him to understand that he was not refusing his aid but one should consider that he had three children and did not want to attract the attention of the Hut [FBI]. To Sergey’s question how he considered it advisable to maintain liaison P. replied that he would be glad to meet but he rarely visited Tyre [New York].

While Stone earned a good living, the message added, “he would not be averse to having a supplementary income.”

Taken together, these messages were suggestive but not conclusive. Unquestionably, the KGB had wanted to establish a covert relationship with Stone and had been willing to pay him, but what exactly it had in mind was left unstated. Another implication was that Stone feared a connection with the KGB could attract FBI attention and jeopardize his career—but that otherwise, he was not averse to a relationship. There was no firm evidence that Stone had agreed to cooperate with the KGB, although Kalugin’s revelation that he had been ordered to reestablish contact with Stone in the 1960s made it clear that Stone must have had some understanding of who was cultivating him.

THE CONTROVERSY about Stone continued to simmer in the ensuing decade, fueled in part by charges by the conservative columnist Robert Novak and the controversialist Ann Coulter that he was a paid agent and a Soviet spy. In 2006, MacPherson’s biography of Stone charged that “neocons” had launched these slanderous attacks on him since they “have a vested interest in portraying Stone as a paid Kremlin stooge because he remains an icon to those who despise all that the far right espoused.” MacPherson also attempted to demonstrate that there was no reason to assume Pancake was Stone; that even if he had been Pancake, he had done nothing more than meet with a Soviet correspondent; and that his only reason for doing so with reluctance was the nefarious behavior of the FBI, which was terrorizing anyone who dared meet with a Russian.

MacPherson’s book set off a round of accusations. Paul Berman, a left-wing anti-Communist writer, dismissed her whitewashing of Stone, noting that Stone’s own writing displayed a long history of glorifying the Soviet Union until the 1950s and that the mere fact of Stone’s having had no access to official secrets and not having stolen anything for the USSR did not mean the KGB would not have valued his cooperation.

Eric Alterman, a onetime Stone protégé, called the Stone-KGB stories “smears,” “phony,” and “pathetic,” dismissing the whole contretemps as “an almost

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entirely bogus controversy over whether Stone ever willingly spied for the Russians or cooperated with the KGB in any way. He did not.”

KGB archival documents tell a different story.

THE FIRST MENTION of Stone comes in a KGB New York station report of April 13, 1936. It mentions “Pancake (Liberal’s lead)—Isidor Feinstein [as Stone was then known], a commentator for the *New York Post*.” “Liberal” was Frank Palmer, who was part of the same New York community of pro-Communist radical journalists. He had also been an agent of the KGB New York station for several years. This note indicated that Palmer had suggested his bosses look at Isidor Feinstein. The New York station further reported in May 1936: “Relations with Pancake have entered the channel of normal operational work. He went to Washington on assignment for his newspaper. Connections in the State Dep. and Congress.” By stating that its relationship with Stone had entered “the channel of normal operational work,” the KGB New York station was reporting that Stone had become a fully active agent. Over the next several years, documents recorded in Vassiliev’s notebooks make clear, Stone worked closely with the KGB.

ONE MIGHT ASK why the KGB would recruit a journalist like Stone, then an editorial writer for the *New York Post*, with no access to government or industrial secrets. In fact, the KGB recruited a great many journalists. A 1941 internal KGB summary report broke down the occupations of Americans working for the spy agency in the prior decade. Twenty-two were journalists, a profession outnumbered only by engineers (forty-nine) and dwarfing economists (four) and professors (eight). While journalists rarely had direct access to technical secrets or classified documents in the way engineers, scientists, or government officials did, the espionage enterprise encompasses more than the classic spy who physically steals a document.

The KGB recruited journalists in part for their access to inside information and sources on politics and policy, insights into personalities, and confidential

and non-public information that never made it into published stories. Certain journalistic working habits also lent themselves to intelligence tasks. By profession, journalists ask questions and probe; what might seem intrusive or suspect if done by anyone else is their normal *modus operandi*. Consequently, the KGB often used journalists as talent spotters for persons who *did* have access to sensitive information, and made use of them to gather background information that would help in evaluating candidates for recruitment.

The flexibility of their work also made journalists desirable as couriers and agent handlers (the liaisons between KGB officers and their American sources). There was also much less risk that a journalist having contact with a government official or engineer would attract the attention of security officials than would a KGB officer under Soviet diplomatic cover. And even if security officials did notice such a meeting, it would be much easier to provide a benign explanation for contact with a pesky American journalist than with a Soviet diplomat. Additionally, the KGB could use journalists for “active measures”—the planting of a story in the press or giving a slant to a story that served KGB goals.

Stone assisted Soviet intelligence on a number of such tasks: talent spotting, acting as a courier by relaying information to other agents, and providing private journalistic tidbits and data the KGB found interesting. In May 1936, for example, the KGB New York station told Moscow:

Pancake reported that Karl Von Wiegand works in Berlin as a correspondent for the Hearst agency “Universal Service.” He had been ordered to maintain friendly relations with Hitler, which was supposedly dictated by the fact that the German press was buying the agency’s information. Hearst is in a deal with German industry to supply the latter with a large consignment of copper. Wiegand does not agree with Hearst’s policy. He turned to Pancake’s boss for advice.

Commenting on Stone’s work as a KGB talent spotter and recruiter, the KGB New York station reported, “Pancake established contact with Dodd. We wanted to recruit him [Dodd] and put him to work

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on the State Dep. line. Pancake should tell Dodd that he has the means to connect him with an anti-Fascist organization in Berlin." William A. Dodd, Jr., was the son of the U.S. ambassador to Germany and an aspiring Popular Front activist with political ambitions. The KGB did recruit him, and Stone briefly functioned as Dodd's intermediary with the KGB, providing him with a contact in Berlin when he went to join his father at the embassy. Stone also passed on to the KGB some information Dodd picked up from the American military attaché in Berlin about possible German military moves against the USSR and the name of a suspected pro-Nazi embassy employee.

There is only one other reference to I.F. Stone's cooperation with the KGB in the 1930s, a note listing him as one of the New York station's agents in late 1938.

Stone next pops up in a 1944 KGB report on Victor Perlo (cover name "Raid"), head of a network of Soviet sources in Washington during World War II. "In 1942-43," the report said, "R. [Raid/Perlo] secretly helped Pancake compile materials for various exposés by the latter." (Perlo was at that time a mid-level economist at the advisory Council of National Defense.) Similarly, a 1945 report about Stanley Graze, a secret Communist and a valued KGB source, noted that in 1943 Graze's wife had been "Pancake's personal secretary, maintaining ties with the latter's informants in government agencies."

These 1944 and 1945 notes do not indicate that Stone was an active KGB agent or even in direct contact with it after 1938, and given Stone's initial anger over the Nazi-Soviet Pact, it is likely that he broke relations with the KGB in late 1939.

Still, Stone had quickly reverted to a pro-Soviet position and, as his links to Victor Perlo and Mrs. Stanley Graze demonstrate, he remained in intimate touch with the Communist underground in Washington in World War II and continued to be viewed by the KGB in a benign light.

In this context, it is evident that Vladimir Pravdin's October 1944 approach to Stone—which came to light in the Venona documents—was not an initial recruitment attempt but an effort to reestablish the agent relationship that the KGB had had with Stone in 1936-38.

Only one other document in Vassiliev's note-

books bears on this question, and it has to do with Harry Truman. The Soviets knew little about Truman when he succeeded to the presidency, and in June 1945 Moscow Center told Pravdin, then chief of the New York KGB station:

Right now the cultivation of Truman's inner circle becomes exceptionally important. This is one of the Station's main tasks. To fulfill this task, the following agent capabilities need to be put to the most effective use: 1. In journalistic circles—Ide, Grin, Pancake . . . Bumblebee. Through these people focus on covering the principal newspaper syndicates and the financial-political groups that are behind them; their relationships with Truman, the pressure exerted on him, etc.

Of the four journalists listed, "Ide"/Samuel Kraf-sur and "Grin"/John Spivak were unambiguously KGB agents. However, "Bumblebee" was not. He was none other than Walter Lippmann, the most prominent opinion columnist of the day. Lippmann knew Pravdin only as a Soviet journalist with whom he traded insights and information.

As for Stone, given Pravdin's effort to rerecruit him in 1944, he could not have been under the illusion that the Soviet was a mere working journalist. Still, because of Lippmann's inclusion in the list, this message makes it impossible to determine the nature of Stone's relationship to the KGB in 1945.

The documentary record shows that I.F. Stone consciously cooperated with Soviet intelligence from 1936 through 1938. An effort was made by Soviet intelligence to reestablish that relationship in 1944-45; we do not know whether that effort succeeded.

To put it plainly, from 1936 to 1939 I.F. Stone was a Soviet spy.

That Stone chose never to reveal this part of his life strongly suggests that he knew just how incompatible it would be with his public image as a courageous and independent journalist. His admirers, who have so strenuously denied even the possibility of such an alliance, have no choice now but to reevaluate his legacy. 