

A Cold War Case Closed

In August of this year, Alger Hiss wrote to Dmitry A. Volkogonov, chairman of the Russian Federation's Commission for the Accession of KGB and Central Committee Archives. Hiss requested all documents about himself, Whittaker Chambers and America's leading Cold War criminal case, which resulted in Hiss's conviction in 1950 on perjury charges for denying he had spied for the Soviet Union in the 1930s.

Volkogonov agreed to undertake the search personally, and he also enlisted Yevgeny Primakov, director of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, and a small army of archivists in the process.

Because Hiss is 88 years old and unable to travel to Moscow, he needed someone to act in his stead. As director of the Nation Institute's Cold War Archives Project, producer-director of a documentary film about the case ("The Trials of Alger Hiss") and a longtime friend of Hiss, I was that person.

On Oct. 15, Volkogonov presented me with his official report: Not a single document implicates Alger Hiss, and Hiss was never a spy for the Soviet Union. I filmed Volkogonov in his office, where he read from his findings, handed me his report and said that "the heavy weight should be lifted from [Hiss's] heart."

Writing in your paper, Allen Weinstein, whose thesis is that Hiss was guilty, questioned "the amazing speed with which some records were reviewed in this instance" (opened, Nov. 4). Arnold Beichman wrote in the Washington Times (Nov. 2) that the jurors in the case count more than Volkogonov and called on the general "to make public all the files on Hiss."

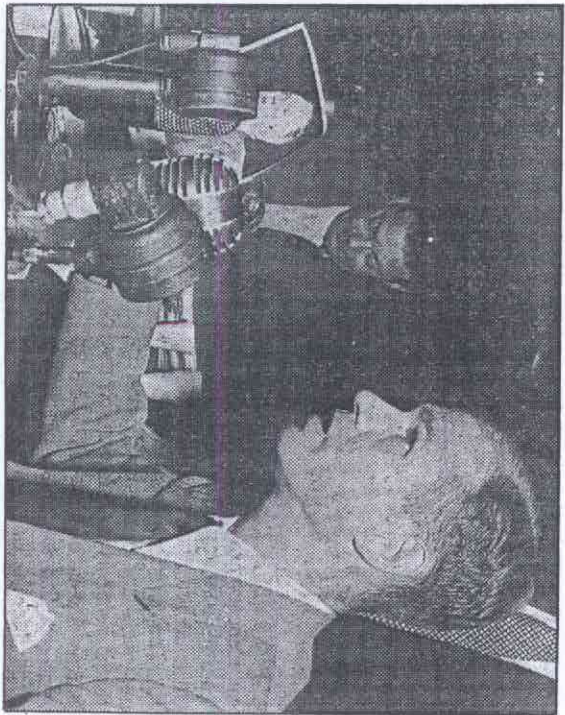
The Los Angeles Times wrote a cautionary editorial headed "Suspicion Still Remains." On the New York Times op-ed page Oct. 31, Whittaker Chambers's biog-

rapher wrote that Volkogonov's statement "raises more questions than it answers."

In fact, the reason that no documents have been released by the general is that there are none. Volkogonov did find documentation of Alger Hiss's "official professional contacts with Soviet officials" in the 1940s. But concerning the espionage allegedly committed by Hiss in the 1930s, the general said he was "unable to obtain documents on him as there are none."

That is not surprising to anyone who knows Soviet history and its intelligence archives. The Soviet archives from the 1930s (and earlier) are complete, intact, beautifully preserved and thoroughly indexed. The Russians have released those old spy files to competent scholars and journalists, who have published their contents. If Volkogonov or Primakov or the many archivists who took part in the search for Hiss files had any reason to believe there were any that had been destroyed or removed, they had and have no reason not to say so. There are no Hiss files, however, because Hiss was not a spy. (Neither, it appears, was Whittaker Chambers.)

Just because U.S. intelligence would probably have created a file on a Soviet counterpart of the Hiss case in 1948, it does not follow that the Soviets must have done likewise. On the contrary, as Georgi Athabov, director of the Institute for USA and Canada, and several Russian archivists and other officials explained to me, Soviet intelligence agents and bureaucrats would not have touched the Hiss case with a ten-foot pole. They would have sedulously avoided writing or saying anything at all about it to anybody. The case was essentially of no interest to the Soviets, but as a political hot potato in the United States, it spelled trouble for any Soviet agent or bureaucrat who might comment or write about it in the dread days of Stalin's capricious whims.



Weinstein also writes that Volkogonov's letter apparently refers to a search of KGB but not military intelligence files, and that "Yevgeny Primakov has made no comment on the matter." In fact, Volkogonov's letter refers to "archives of the intelligence services of the USSR," without restriction to KGB archives. Volkogonov told me expressly that he examined the military intelligence files. He told me on videotape that his "firm conclusion that Alger Hiss was not ever or anywhere recruited as an agent of the intelligence services of the Soviet Union" is confirmed by "the opinion of the head of foreign intelligence services of Russia," Yevgeny Primakov.

The only files I know of concerning the Hiss case that have not been made avail-

able for examination are Weinstein's own files. When challenged on interviews he reported in his book 14 years ago, he promised to deposit his interview tapes with the Truman Library. As reported in the American Historical Association Newsletter for February 1992 and as of this writing he still has not done so.

The reflex reactions by old Cold Warriors suggest how difficult it must be for those with vested career interests in Alger Hiss's guilt to revisit their basic assumptions. For me—and, I daresay, for Alger Hiss and for history—Volkogonov's report does not reopen the case, it closes it.

—John Lowenthal

The writer is director of the Nation Institute's Cold War Archives Project.