

The Unending Trial of Alger Hiss

New Evidence Rekindles An Old Debate

By Jeffrey A. Frank
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Whether Alger Hiss was guilty of spying for the Russians was one of the longest-running arguments of the Cold War era—and perhaps the only one still on the table. For those who've come late, it is difficult to explain the passionate intensity that surrounds the episode. But the Hiss case has divided and mystified Americans for nearly 50 years, enlisting new generations in a debate that has become almost purely historical.

In recent years, it has also become something of a Halloween play, a cloak-and-dagger story rising from its Cold War grave. Just a year ago, Gen. Dmitri Volkogonov, the Russian historian and archivist, asserted that Soviet intelligence archives revealed no proof that Hiss had ever spied for the Soviet Union. Volkogonov later conceded that his conclusion was based on incomplete evidence, but the caldron was stirred again—and Hiss and his supporters declared that he'd been exonerated.

The latest round began earlier this month in a paper delivered at

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Alger Hiss

HISS, From B1

New York University by the Hungarian historian Maria Schmidt. Schmidt reported that an American defector, Noel Haviland Field, had incriminated Hiss in various statements made to Hungarian secret police. Field had gone to Eastern Europe in 1949, only to find himself suspected of being a double agent—and jailed. After his release, he was questioned by Budapest officials; in one interrogation transcript found in newly public files, Field reportedly said that he'd realized in 1935 that Hiss was a spy:

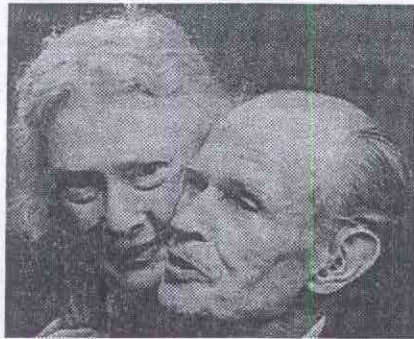
"Hiss . . . wanted to recruit me for espionage for the Soviet Union. I did not find the right answer and carelessly told him that I was already working for the Soviet intelligence. . . . I knew, from what Hiss told me, that he was working for the Soviet secret service."

The testimony is persuasive to many because the Fields and Hisses were social friends in the 1930s and Field had no obvious motive for making up such things. Hiss himself says that he and Field were drawn together by common world policy concerns and attended meetings of the Foreign Policy Association. "Both he and I were naturally aware of the Nazi threat," Hiss, who is 88, said in a telephone interview. But Hiss says he rejects what Field said: "He was still under duress, he was not a free man. If he didn't please them—well, there's a quotation from Noel Field's adopted daughter, who says, 'After torture you'll say anything.'"

Others, however, point out that there is not much new in the Field statements—that a lot of it had come to light in Flora Lewis's 1965 book about Field, "Red Pawn," as well as in Allen Weinstein's "Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case," published in 1978. What is new is the sudden availability of detail from the Hungarian records—which has prompted historians like Weinstein to call for their quick release.



Alger Hiss denies accusations in 1948 that he was a Russian spy.



Alger Hiss with his wife, Isabel, following a news conference in October 1992.

But whether the material is revelatory or familiar depends very much on one's original stance. Thus, one researcher believes that what Field said is a "smoking gun" while lawyer Ethan Klingsberg, writing in the current *Nation* magazine, suggests that it was coerced testimony and warns about the "file fever" stemming from release of more and more Communist-era archives. In other words, as is so often the case in the Hiss affair, one tends to believe what one wants.

Standing by His Story

For connoisseurs of American political drama, the Hiss case was always boffo. For starters, its casting was impeccable: Hiss, the New Dealer friend of John Foster Dulles, State Department official and president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, was accused of being a spy. Not only that, he was accused by Whittaker Chambers, who was in many ways the mirror image of Hiss: a lapsed Communist, a confessed liar, a man with bad teeth and a disreputable appearance. He was also a *Time* senior editor and the translator of "Bambi."

But if Chambers was an unappealing witness in contrast to the dapper Hiss, his testimony

was supported by a great deal of tangible and circumstantial evidence: documents he'd kept in a pumpkin patch (the "pumpkin papers") that he said he'd received from Hiss for transmission to the Soviets; documents that appeared to be typed on Hiss's typewriter; the gift to Chambers of a Ford "with a sassy little trunk" from Hiss, a man who'd sworn that he barely knew Chambers.

Chambers's testimony was given to the House Committee on Un-American Activities, whose members included Rep. Richard M. Nixon—and whose career was launched by the case. For researchers, the Hiss matter became an obsession rivaling the Sacco-Vanzetti affair or, for a later generation, the Kennedy assassination. Eventually, Chambers's accusation led to two trials, one of which resulted in 1950 in Hiss's conviction for perjury—lying about receiving secret documents from Chambers. Hiss served four years in prison.

Among the witnesses at Hiss's trial was Hede Massing, who had once been married to a Soviet operative in the United States. Massing said that she'd met Hiss through the Fields. Allen Weinstein reported that Massing told the FBI that she'd bantered with Hiss about trying to lure Noel Field into spying. In one of the Hungarian transcripts, Field recalls that Massing was angry at him for his loose lips. "I received a stern rebuke from her," he recalls, according to Maria Schmidt.

For his part, Hiss for 40 years has publicly and consistently proclaimed his innocence. He conceded that he had known Chambers under the name "George Crosley," but he denied all wrongdoing: He had never been a Communist, never committed espionage, hadn't a clue as to why Chambers was saying these things. He said he had been framed by McCarthyite—or J. Edgar Hooverite—forces and insisted that the evidence against him was concocted by his political enemies. Even the typewriting, he said, was forged.

Hiss still stands by this account and says: "It all goes back to the story that Hede Massing

told at my trial, and that she told to a lot of people before. I don't think anybody who knows anything about Hede Massing would lend credibility to her story." He argues that Field was simply trying to impress his Hungarian captors with names of American contacts.

Flora Lewis, the columnist and Field biographer, disagrees. "The first account of the connection with Hiss came from Hede Massing, and I had every reason to believe her. It fit with everything else."

Writing in the New York Times, Chambers's biographer, Sam Tanenhaus, also argues that what Schmidt found in Hungary corroborates the Massing testimony. It might, he said, be the "most important of all because it contradicts the contents of a letter Mr. Field sent to Mr. Hiss in 1957 in which he offered to make a public repudiation of Mrs. Massing's testimony." Schmidt, he writes, "found several drafts of the letter, some of them dating as early as 1955, each doctored by Mr. Field's superiors in Budapest."

Lewis says that Hiss once showed her letters from Field and, like Tanenhaus, she has her doubts. Were they written in sincerity to assert Hiss's innocence? "I don't believe that for a minute."

Field was released from a Hungarian prison in 1954. Lewis, who tried without success to interview him in Budapest, recalls going to his residence and finding that "it was quite a good house, with a gate, and he sent the maid out, but refused to see me. . . . We exchanged notes."

Field died in 1970 at age 60, and in a brief autobiographical fragment (quoted by Weinstein), recalled his leftward drift in the New Deal era: "I watched and sometimes took part in radical meetings and demonstrations, sought contact with left-wingers of different shade [while working for the State Department]. . . . A dual life, reflecting a dual personality struggling to overcome the conflict between old and new loyalties."

The Battle Goes On

In the case of Alger Hiss, no one ever changes sides. For decades, the rightward New Republic has called Hiss guilty, while the leftish Nation has argued his innocence. When Weinstein's "Perjury" was published, it was assailed by Nation Editor Victor Navasky. When Volkogonov's testimony was first published, it was assailed by Chambers biographer Tanenhaus, who this month applauded the Maria Schmidt findings.

Hiss's son, Tony, a writer for the New Yorker, wrote a loving piece about his father last year when the Volkogonov statement was issued. This week he said: "I've never met anyone who has a harder time trying to hide anything than Alger Hiss. He is proud of the fact that he was a loyal New Dealer and a believer in the founding principles of the U.N. . . . I once met Laurence Olivier, who I thought was the greatest actor in the world. Alger would have to be 100 times better."

Alger Hiss is also loyally supported by John Lowenthal, a former law professor who campaigned to have Volkogonov issue his declaration last year. Lowenthal, too, found nothing new in the Noel Field statements reported by Schmidt. The testimony, he said, "did not contain any fact or explicit statement which would indicate that Alger Hiss was delivering U.S. documents to the Soviet Union. . . ."

Allen Weinstein, who now runs the Center for Democracy, sounds as if he has heard it all, as perhaps he has. "They stumbled right into a controversy that is only of historical interest I am happy to say at this point."

A smoking gun? "I think it's a piece of evidence that has to be corroborated by seeing the actual documents. It's another bit of cumulative evidence to add to what we already know."

Tony Hiss says: "What astonishes me, it's like a curse in a fairy tale. It just won't go away."