

FBI Says Evidence Lacking Against A-Bomb Scientists

By David Streitfeld
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The FBI does not have "any credible evidence" that four top scientists on the U.S. atom bomb project secretly helped the Soviets 50 years ago, FBI Director Louis J. Freeh said in a letter released yesterday.

In fact, said Freeh, the bureau has classified information "that argues against" the allegations made last year in "Special Tasks" by former Soviet spymaster Pavel Sudoplatov. The book caused a furor by asserting that Niels Bohr, Enrico Fermi, Robert Oppenheimer and Leo Szilard provided the Soviets with information for their atom bomb program.

The FBI reviewed its files at the request of the president's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. At a news conference yesterday, board chairman Les Aspin cautioned that "this is not proof. The issue is proving a negative, and it's very difficult if not impossible to prove a negative."

Aspin said he had reviewed the FBI's analysis, but wasn't authorized to describe material it was based on. Pressed for at least an example, he mentioned the existence of classified "lists of names of people who helped in developing the nuclear capability of the Soviet Union."

If the four scientists "were wittingly involved in espionage, you'd expect their names to be there and they are not," Aspin said. He suggested Sudoplatov, who as director of the Administration for Special Tasks supervised part of the Soviet intelligence apparatus, had confused code names and identities.

Jerrold Schecter, a former Time magazine Moscow bureau chief who

was one of Sudoplatov's coauthors on "Special Tasks," was at the news conference and was not convinced. "Isn't the FBI itself an interested party in this investigation?" he asked, noting that Sudoplatov's version of events clashed sharply with the accepted histories of the time. "Why can't these materials be declassified 50 years later?"

"Special Tasks" is a memoir that offers minimal evidence beyond Sudoplatov's vaguely worded assertions. His claims received wide dissemination in Time magazine, which ran a nine-page excerpt last April, and on "The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour," which broadcast a 27-minute segment.

In return for being first with the news, both organizations agreed not to do any independent reporting to check out the allegations further. Time managing editor James R. Gaines later expressed some regrets at the way the excerpt was handled. "We should have made it clear that the usual standard of accuracy for Time magazine pieces did not apply in this case," he said.

All four of the scientists are dead, but they found many defenders in the scientific community. The largest group of physicists, the American Physical Society, denounced the chapter of "Special Tasks" that made the atomic claims, as did many historians of the field. The Russian Foreign Intelligence Service said the charges "do not correspond to reality."

After 20 minutes of restating the FBI's conclusion without winning over either Schecter or several other members of the audience, Aspin wearily concluded, "You can believe what you want. . . . This is not, I presume, the last word on this subject."