
Elizabeth Bentley was a prime ex-Communist witness of the early Cold War era, yet her star burned less luminously than those of other former Reds. She took her tale of espionage to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 1945 and testified to a grand jury, at eight congressional hearings, and at four trials. She conformed to the parameters of this emerging profession: she capitalized her past by writing, lecturing, and testifying about it; she responded to the ever more voracious appetites of committees and prosecutors by “improving” her recollections; like former *Daily Worker* editor Louis Budenz, she returned to religion and was converted to Catholicism by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. Yet, unlike the case with some of her male peers, permanent membership on the “A” list of professional ex-Communists and moral preceptors of the Cold War eluded her. Nor could she derive a living from this calling. She remains “neglected” (p. ix) by historians, exiled from survey textbooks and lacking—until now—a scholarly biography.

Bentley lived the tortuous life common to Communists who became informants, and she played an important role as a witness against the Communist underground. Her origins furnished thin soil to nourish a spy queen. Her youth was mildly unhappy. Her parents were straight-laced, respected denizens of Connecticut; her father’s business failures forced a move from New Milford to Rochester, New York, where her high-school experience was less than golden. Still, she won a scholarship to and a B.A. from Vassar College. A classmate recalled her as “plain,” rather a “sad sack” (p. 3). Bentley claimed, with the embellishment that often colored her writings and testimony, that she was mis-educated there and thus made “a complete pushover for communism” (p. 4). All this was cheerless enough, but well short of Zola-esque.

Pursuit of graduate studies led her to Florence, where she studied Italian literature. She caroused, drank heavily (as she did throughout her life), slept around, and had an affair with her professor, a dividend of which was the master’s essay he had his assistant write for her. She fell in with a Fascist student organization, though she would later say that this was where her *anti*-Fascist
sensibilities were honed. Returning to Columbia University, she joined the
Communist party, mostly to fill a social void in her life. She furnished her days
with minor party business, snooping on her pro-Fascist bosses at the Italian
Library of Information, where she briefly found work after she had to give up
graduate school.

Her career as a minor snitch changed dramatically in 1938, when she met
the love of her life, Jacob Golos. Born Jacob Raisin, “Golos” (Russian for
“voice”) had been a real Bolshevik. When he was sent to the United States, his
tasks included supplying false passports to Soviet agents and Communists; he
also sat on the American Communist party’s Control Commission, imposing
Stalinist ideological purity on members. He was involved in plots to get rid of
Leon Trotsky. And he ran spies.

Their party connection turned amorous, they began living together, and he
drew her into his secret work. She had “day jobs” with two party fronts while
she commuted to Washington to glean intelligence from party members and
sympathizers in and near government. As Golos’s health was failing and he was
battling with his KGB superiors, who were seeking to take over his networks,
she took increasing responsibility for the espionage efforts. Soon she was in
contact with people such as engineer Abe Brothman, after whom the FBI was
eventually able to zero in on Julius Rosenberg. She called periodically on
Nathan G. Silvermaster, leader of a group of federal employees who passed on
data from their agencies; its satellites included Lauchlin Currie and Harry
Dexter White. (The precise allegiances of these two men still remain contro-
verted.) She had other sources (of a dozen in all), such as Mary Price, who
worked for pundit Walter Lippmann, and William Remington of the War
Production Board. Golos himself ran Julius Rosenberg.

After Golos died in late 1943, Bentley played a cat-and-mouse game with
NKGB agents. She picked up another network, the Perlo group, in 1944, but,
under pressure from the Soviets to turn over her sources, she began to rethink
her allegiance. Her commitment to communism had been weakly based in ide-
ology, so shifting political principles was not primary to her change of heart.
Partly it was fear—not without warrant—that drove her to the FBI. (Her
concerns were not idle: Olmsted cites evidence that her Soviet controller had
received sanction to kill her. Also, Louis Budenz’s defection threatened her with
exposure.) Having lied to her Soviet superiors, she initially withheld from the
FBI the full dimensions of her activities; only after several months did she fully
spin her tale of espionage. When she did, it electrified the FBI and J. Edgar
Hoover. He sent a heads-up to the White House, but nothing happened. Her
later grand jury testimony, leaked to the newspapers, brought the Communist
issue to the headlines. Soon she was snatched up to testify before two congres-
sional committees in the flurry that brought the Hiss case into the very public
domain in the summer of 1948.

The espionage yield varied in quality. Some of it compromised national secu-
rity and/or foreign policy; in other instances, it was trivial. These furtive doings
carried dangers for both the participants and the U.S. government, but the ama-
teurishness on both sides was exceptional. The Golos-Bentley sources all feared
discovery, but it often looked as if they need not have bothered. Thus, when,
in 1939, Whittaker Chambers warned him of Communist infiltration of the
government, Assistant Secretary Adolph A. Berle, the State Department’s secu-
ritv specialist, moved with less than dramatic vigor. When he prodded the FBI
in 1941, they, too, were a study in languor. Bentley herself feared she was being
followed in 1941; she was, but the tailing soon ended. The FBI did not seri-
ously check out Chambers’ story until 1945.

There was Keystone Cops technique on both sides. Golos taught Bentley
some tradecraft—she could shake a tail—but his own was none too foolproof.
When the government uncovered his passport racket, he had to register as a
foreign agent, hardly a secure position for a spymaster, and his work led to the
jailing of Earl Browder for passport fraud. Browder himself, though chief of
the open Communist party, dabbled in espionage. Bentley blithely visited her
charges in Washington, bringing back the haul in her knitting bag, and their
chief precautions entailed meeting her away from their offices. Washington in
the 1930s resembled a bloated small town of open doors, where information-
seekers of all sorts moved to and fro with little hindrance and where, for cover,
one could pose thinly as a “journalist.”

Bentley’s revelations in November 1945 energized the FBI: she fingered
some people already under suspicion and corroborated some of Chambers’
charges. Hoover threw seventy-two agents into the case. The FBI also tried to
reinsert her as a double agent in the Soviet spy network, but at their next
meeting, which the FBI monitored, her control became suspicious of her. In
addition, once Hoover had passed news of her defection on to his British coun-
terparts, the knowledge came to Kim Philby in British intelligence; he promptly
informed the Soviets, who shut down their operations.

Kathryn Olmstead’s book is not “revisionist”: it does not swim against a tide
of opinion about Bentley’s veracity. Though many journalists were skeptical of
Bentley—A. J. Liebling called her a “Nutmeg Mata Hari”—historians have
tended to uphold the bulk of her testimony. Legal scholar Herbert Packer
expressed qualms about some aspects of her avowals, including her claims (in
her book) to recall exact dialogue, anachronisms in her testimony, insinuations
that she knew people whom, it turned out, she did not, her dodging of deposi-
tions solicited by two of those she accused, and the egregious fact that the
foreman of the grand jury before which she testified helped write her book. Yet
he found nothing in the perjury trials of William Remington—critical tests of
her credibility—that “seriously [shook] the main outline of her story.”

1. Ishkak Akhmerov, the Soviets’ illegal resident agent, was married to Browder’s niece.
Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and
the Secret History of the KGB (New York, 1999), 48.

2. Herbert L. Packer, Ex-Communist Witnesses: Four Studies in Fact-Finding (Stanford, CA,
1962), 59, 61–62, 78, 85–86, 91. Olmsted provides detailed analysis of discrepancies in and
embellishments of Bentley’s story as it evolved. On Remington, see Gary May, Un-American
Latham came to a similar conclusion: on some matters, Bentley embroidered the truth, but “most of what [she and Chambers] said was correct.” The books that treat Venona, the project to decrypt wartime Soviet NKVD traffic back to Moscow, make a similar assessment. According to John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, these cables show that Bentley “told the truth.” Olmsted relies heavily on Venona and its literature, as well as on the seemingly endless FBI records of debriefings—and surveillance—of Bentley.

In the context of the patriarchal gender relations of the “high” Cold War era, Olmsted argues that Bentley showed herself a strong, feisty woman, at times defying, manipulating, and bargaining with the NKVD, the FBI, and others. The author argues that men of that era found an independent woman like Bentley hard to fathom—hence, both friend and foe depicted her as a “blonde spy queen” or “neurotic spinster.” Though a brunette, she became the quintessential “Bad Blonde” (p. 136). The FBI even noted—for internal consumption—that she did not know how to dress.

Olmsted is generally on target. Yet Bentley, as Olmsted also notes, brought some of this treatment on herself. She scandalized her FBI debriefers with her penchant for sleeping around, and many times they attributed her often-frail mental balance to menopause—“the longest . . . in recorded history” (p. 200). Her explanation of her bout with espionage was to say that she did it for love. She often played the victim. When William H. Taylor, a United Nations employee she identified as a member of the Silvermaster group, sued for libel, she ran for protection. She complained that it was an effort “to force me out into the open . . . so that I will have to give the first detailed information in his libel suit” without legal protection. She suggested to Senator Karl Mundt that Congress needed to enact protections for witnesses such as herself.

Olmsted is right: Bentley has suffered neglect. Yet while it is true that she has not gotten the serious analysis earned by male defector Whittaker Chambers, that outcome stems largely from the fact that she was no Chambers. While the dissolution of his early life more than matched her own, Chambers was a gifted writer and thinker, in his “proletarian” phase, at Time, and as a memoirist. Bentley’s Out of Bondage is no Witness. And Witness was entirely Chambers’ doing. Bentley’s two major writings—her master’s thesis and memoir—eventuated in whole and in part, respectively, from the work of others.

6. Elizabeth Bentley to Karl Mundt, 66A191, Box 6, Karl E. Mundt Papers, Dakota State University, Madison, South Dakota.
Often her power came from leveraging the system—stalling the NKVD with “feminine” wiles and role-play, carrying on until she prevailed (as when she got the FBI to put her on the payroll). She was gutsy and tenacious, but her triumphs derived from exploiting her relationships. That may indeed reflect gender standings in the 1930s and 1940s, but it also tends to shade some of Bentley’s intrepidity.

Nonetheless, Olmsted correctly emphasizes the importance of Bentley’s role at key junctures of the coming of the age of anti-Communism—mobilizing the FBI, testimony that launched the “Hiss case,” appearing before the New York grand jury the indictments of which led to the Dennis case, and witnessing at trials that undergirded the emerging loyalty-security regime. This perceptive, deeply researched biography ought to rescue Bentley from the oblivion into which she has been cast, and makes her importance amply accessible to historians.