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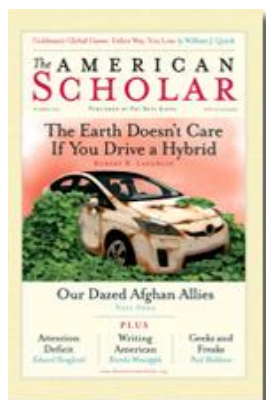
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## The Mystery of Ales

*The argument that Alger Hiss was a WWII-era Soviet asset is flawed. New evidence points to someone else*

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By Kai Bird and Svetlana Chervonnaya



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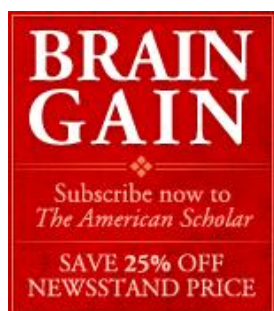
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Nearly 60 years ago, Alger Hiss, a former high official in the U.S. State Department, was convicted of perjury and sentenced to prison on the grounds that he had lied about his role in a Soviet spy ring prior to World War II. The Hiss case became the most controversial spy story of the Cold War — and for good reason. As the distinguished historian Walter LaFeber once observed, “It was the Hiss trial, among other [events] that triggered the McCarthy era.” For many conservatives, the Hiss case confirmed the specter of Soviet infiltration at the highest levels of American government. The case also catapulted an obscure California congressman, Richard M. Nixon, onto the national scene. Nixon championed the allegations against Hiss and in 1950 was elected to the U.S. Senate, largely based on the notoriety he had acquired from the case.

Although Hiss insisted on his innocence until his death in 1996, many Cold War historians, and perhaps most notably Allen Weinstein in his 1978 book, *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case*, have firmly concluded that Hiss was part of a clandestine Communist cell from 1935 onward and that he passed information to the Soviet Union from late 1936 until early 1938 through an underground Communist courier named Whittaker Chambers. Most historians have conceded the argument to Weinstein (who is today the Archivist of the United States). They have done so, however, not because the evidence against Hiss is clear and definitive, but because the evidence box — filled as it is with a morass of circumstantial detail — leaves them the easy option of finding him guilty of some form of espionage activity during his murky relationship with Chambers.

To a few skeptics, however, this muddled spy case will remain an open question until the Russian archives disgorge incontrovertible proof that Hiss was or was not a conscious agent. Despite continuing claims that the documents U.S. researchers obtained from the Russian archives in the early- to mid-1990s represent, in the words of scholars John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, a “massive documentation of the guilt” of Alger Hiss, not a single document with his name or that of his accuser Whittaker Chambers has ever been



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produced from the publicly accessible Russian archives. To be sure, there are a few references to Alger Hiss in Soviet-era documents that have been leaked to Weinstein and his Russian co-author, Alexander Vassiliev. But in their book *The Haunted Wood*, Weinstein and Vassiliev leave the impression that Hiss is repeatedly mentioned in Soviet-era documents. Their narrative of Hiss's espionage in the 1930s is heavily referenced to Weinstein's own *Perjury*. And when they quote from three 1945 KGB documents describing a Soviet source at the State Department, they substitute Hiss's name in brackets for "Ales," the cover name for an American working for the Soviets. They do the same thing when quoting from a Soviet intelligence cable dated March 30, 1945, decrypted and released by the U.S. government under the National Security Agency's VENONA program. Weinstein and Vassiliev did get exclusive access to a crop of documents from the KGB archive. But the references to Hiss in those documents boil down to only five pages from a single SVR (the successor agency to the KGB) file.

We do not propose to address the larger question of whether Hiss was guilty or innocent of espionage, but rather to explore whether he fits the profile of the Soviet asset hidden behind the cover name Ales (pronounced A'-les). Historians of the craft of intelligence recognize the peril of assigning identities to code names more than 50 years after their use. It is difficult at best to translate from one language and culture to another, particularly when dealing with partially decrypted documents. Other imponderables include the ambiguities surrounding witting and unwitting sources and, most obviously, the incentives for intelligence officers to exaggerate the value of both their information and their sources.

All of this is to say that we are aware that, like others before us, we tread on thin ice. Still, we have found evidence to suggest that Hiss could not have been Ales. Moreover, an alternative candidate exists.

### THE VENONA PUZZLE

Until the mid-1990s, Weinstein and other historians accepted Chambers's assertions that Hiss's associations with the Soviets were confined to the period of 1936–38. But when the NSA declassified the VENONA documents in the mid-1990s, students of the case claimed that Hiss continued his presumed espionage into the World War II years. The documents are a collection of intercepted and fragmentary decrypted cables between Moscow and its overseas intelligence outposts (most prominently New York and Washington, D.C.) that produced hundreds of cryptonyms for agents, assets, or contacts of Soviet intelligence. They also included many names of unsuspecting Americans whom Soviet intelligence operatives discussed, targeted, or merely mentioned. Hiss's name turned up in this second group.

In one such fragmentary GRU (Russian military intelligence) cable, it is reported that an NKGB (a forerunner of the KGB) operative mentioned an official "from the State Department by the name of HISS." Normally, these Russian-language cables use the Cyrillic alphabet, but here HISS is spelled out in the Latin alphabet, perhaps indicating that the name was unfamiliar to the sender.

Could a person openly named in such a message be an agent of that service at the time the message was written or at any previous time? Not according to Lt. Gen. Vitaly Pavlov, a former KGB foreign intelligence officer who had supervised intelligence operations focused on the United States from late in 1938. When interviewed in 2002, Pavlov firmly stated that no one openly named in the VENONA cables could have been an agent. Why was he so sure? "Had he ever been an agent, the service would have his code name in the system." Three years later, this opinion was upheld by another Russian intelligence professional, Maj. Gen. Julius Kobyakov. After reading one VENONA cable, Kobyakov told us that had Hiss been an agent, "it would be very unusual to put a true name in a cable: speaking about

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This VENONA message openly using the name *Hiss* has been lost in a heated, decade-long discussion of yet another VENONA cable, 1822, sent from Washington to Moscow, originating from the NKGB intelligence station on the top floor of the Soviet Embassy on 16th Street. Dated March 30, 1945, the cable describes a Soviet agent who had the code name *Ales*. The NSA released its English translation of the cable in 1996 with a footnote saying that Ales was “probably” Alger Hiss.

According to FBI historian John F. Fox, the identification of Ales as Alger Hiss in VENONA 1822 dates back to a May 15, 1950, FBI memorandum from Alan Belmont, head of the FBI espionage section. “It would appear likely,” the 1950 memo surmised, “that this individual [Ales] is Alger Hiss in view of the fact that he was in the State Department and the information from Chambers indicated that his wife, Priscilla, was active in Soviet espionage and he also had a brother, Donald, in the State Department.”

Those officials privy to the VENONA intercept seem to have conducted, at best, a cursory investigation of Ales’s identity. Hiss, who was in the news for his perjury conviction, seemed to fill the bill. Even so, in the same May 15 memo, the FBI noted that “an attempt is being made by analysis of the available information to verify this identification.” Even three years after Hiss’s conviction in 1950, the FBI was still conducting interviews about Ales — suggesting that the bureau had doubts.

Yet almost half a century later, when the FBI’s May 15 memo was released to a U.S. Senate commission, no mention was made of the bureau’s initial and continuing doubts. Appendix A of what has become known as the Moynihan Commission Report said that “a Soviet cable of March 30, 1945, identified an agent, code-name ALES, as having attended the Yalta Conference of February 1945. He had then journeyed to Moscow where, according to the cable, he and his colleagues were ‘awarded Soviet decorations.’ This could only be Alger Hiss, Deputy Director of the State Department’s Office of Special Political Affairs; the other three State Department officials in the delegation from Yalta to Moscow are beyond suspicion.”

Ever since, Ales’s identity as Alger Hiss has become a mantra for longtime believers in Hiss’s guilt. Today, NSA historian Robert L. Benson goes so far as to say that the word “probably” should be dropped in the NSA’s tentative identification of Ales. In his view, there can no longer be any question that Hiss engaged in wartime spying on behalf of the Soviet Union and that he is the Ales described in VENONA 1822.

At first, this reasoning appears to be straightforward and logical. But a closer reading of VENONA 1822 raises numerous questions:

- The cable says that Ales had been working with the GRU since 1935; Chambers specifically said that Hiss had no GRU connections before 1937.

- The cable says that Ales was the leader of a small group “mainly consisting of his relatives.” Hiss, his critics have assumed, was “working” with his wife, Priscilla, and his brother Donald — although no one has ever lodged any espionage allegations against Donald, and the FBI itself said charges that he was a member of the Communist Party were unsubstantiated. Neither has any evidence surfaced that Priscilla was a Communist Party member.

- The cable says that Ales provided his Soviet handlers with “military information only.” Here the evidence pointing to Hiss is at best ambiguous, if not exculpatory. It would be illogical to use a State Department career diplomat with a legal background for obtaining

information that would not normally come his way — and at the same time to underuse him for getting the diplomatic information he would encounter naturally. Attempts to prove that Hiss was Ales by pointing out that by 1944–45 he was privy to information on military matters seem to disregard this elementary logic of intelligence tradecraft.

- Finally, and most important, VENONA 1822 reports that “after the YALTA Conference, when he had gone on to MOSCOW, a Soviet personage in a very responsible position (ALES gave to understand that it was Comrade Vyshinsky) allegedly got in touch with ALES and at the behest of the Military NEIGHBORS passed onto him their gratitude and so on.”

Those who believe Hiss is Ales argue that this clue is the clincher: Ales attended the Yalta conference in February 1945 — and so did Hiss. Ales left Yalta and flew to Moscow where the Soviet deputy foreign minister, Andrei Vyshinsky, ostensibly conveyed “their gratitude.” Like Ales, Hiss did leave the Yalta conference and fly with Secretary of State Edward R. Stettinius to Moscow, where he remained for two days. On the evening of February 13, 1945, Hiss accompanied Stettinius to a performance of *Swan Lake* at the Bolshoi; he and Stettinius’s party sat in the central box of the theater with Vyshinsky — who presumably seized this occasion, perhaps during an intermission, to take Hiss aside for a moment and express his gratitude. Case closed.

But after months of digging in both the American and Russian archives, we have discovered new evidence that demonstrates the falsity of this damning scenario. Hiss was not Ales. The historians who have maintained that he was Ales turned an assumption and a few clues into a conclusion without bothering to determine if Hiss actually fit the profile of Ales — or asking whether someone else better fit that profile.

## THE SECOND GORSKY CABLE

We have found that Hiss had a firm alibi. We know this from a relatively recent discovery, a Soviet-era cable that sheds new light on the clues to Ales’s identity given in VENONA 1822. This new evidence surfaced during a libel suit filed in London by Vassiliev, Weinstein’s Russian collaborator on *The Haunted Wood*. In 2003, Vassiliev lost his suit, but in the course of the trial he introduced numerous notes he had taken on Soviet-era documents that he was allowed to read (but not to photocopy) in the archives of the SVR. One of these documents was a March 5, 1945, cable signed “Vadim,” written to his colleagues in Moscow. Vadim is known to have been Anatoly Gorsky, the NKGB’s station chief in Washington, who operated under the cover name Anatoly Gromov and the cover position of the first secretary in the Soviet Embassy in Washington. Gorsky would also be the author, almost a month later, of VENONA 1822. Weinstein had access to Vassiliev’s notes on the March 5 Gorsky cable, but he cited only a small portion of it in *The Haunted Wood*.

The important clue in the notes reads “Special attention — to ‘Ales.’ Was at Yalta conference, then left for Mexico-City [and] has not yet come back.” Gorsky places Ales at Yalta — and asserts that as of March 5 he was still in Mexico City attending the Inter-American Conference on the Problems of War and Peace. After flying from Yalta to Moscow, Hiss had indeed accompanied Secretary Stettinius to the Mexico City conference, arriving on February 20. But Stettinius had asked Hiss to organize the San Francisco conference to found the United Nations. The conference was scheduled to open on April 25, and there was a lot of work to be done. So, less than two days after arriving in Mexico City, Hiss was ordered to fly home on the secretary’s airplane.

Hiss arrived in Washington on Thursday, February 22, and went to his office to catch up on the backlog of preparations for the conference. An international crisis was brewing, stemming from sudden French and Chinese demands about which countries would be the

“inviting parties” to the conference. This dispute had already pushed back the date on which official invitations would be sent. Originally the invitations were scheduled to go out on February 24 — which is why Hiss had to leave Mexico City to be back in Washington. The invitations were unquestionably Hiss’s top priority at this time, but because of foot dragging by the French, their issuance had to be postponed. Over the next few days, several proposed new dates came and went. Both the State Department and the Soviet People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs in Moscow were in continuous communication on this issue with their respective embassies.

It is significant to understand that the Soviets knew that Hiss was the State Department’s point man on the San Francisco invitations. At Yalta, it was Hiss who had twice handed over to Ambassador Andrei Gromyko the U.S. draft of the invitation for the conference. By March 1, the situation had reached a crisis point. The Soviets were anxious that the invitation be issued as agreed at Yalta — and they knew that Hiss would be the man to resolve the issue.

At 7:00 p.m. on Saturday, March 3, Hiss was one of the three State Department officials to appear on an NBC broadcast titled “Building the Peace.” Hiss was introduced as the “Deputy Director of the Office of Special Political Affairs.” Because “Mr. Hiss has just returned from the Crimea Conference,” Assistant Secretary of State Archibald MacLeish directed many of his questions to him. The next morning, March 4, Washington’s *Sunday Star* reported on the radio show in an article headlined, “State Department Radio Show Gives ‘Oaks’ Plan in Plain Talk.” The article named Hiss as a participant. *The New York Times* ran a similar a story the same day, and it too mentioned Hiss.

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If Gorsky (the “Vadim” of the March 5 and 30 cables), the NKGB’s man in Washington, was doing his job, either he or his assistants were listening to the radio and reading the *Times* or the *Star*. Gorsky, age 38, was a sophisticated and experienced operative. In 1939, when stationed in London, he had been running 18 agents, including Kim Philby of the famous “Cambridge Five.” In Washington, his main job as the Soviet Embassy’s first secretary was that of a press officer, which involved daily monitoring of the press, reports of information agencies, and radio broadcasts.

Gorsky would have to have been incompetent not to know that Hiss had returned from Mexico City. Gorsky and his Soviet Embassy colleagues would have been particularly interested in Hiss’s activities at the State Department on March 5, when a morning press and radio news conference took place there.

At the press conference, Hiss went to the rostrum to “explain some of the technical aspects of these points concerning the functions of the Security Council” and to answer the correspondents’ questions. The press corps turned out in force to hear the announcement. Even if Gorsky as press officer did not attend the event, he would have been listening to it on the radio and would also have been informed by Laurence Todd, an American journalist who covered State for the Soviet news agency TASS from 1927 to 1952. Moreover, we know

that early that morning Acting Secretary of State Joseph Grew “telephoned the Soviet Ambassador [Gromyko] . . . and said that at 12:00 o’clock today we are issuing the invitations to the U.N. conference.”

When the NSA chose in 1995 to declassify the VENONA decrypts, historians such as Weinstein assumed that the NSA identification of Ales was confirmation of Hiss’s pre-war espionage. But of course it was more than that. VENONA cable 1822 was used to confirm Whittaker Chambers’s original accusations, but also to up the ante on Hiss, transforming him into a long-term spy (a decade of espionage instead of less than two years) and one so valuable to the Soviets that they went out of their way to convey their gratitude to him by informing him that he had been decorated by the Soviet government. These allegations are far more serious than the charge of pre-war espionage. Despite the fact that VENONA 1822 and the March 5 Gorsky cable contain significant clues, and perhaps because Hiss’s guilt has been so widely accepted, no one has until now made a serious effort to investigate whether anyone other than Hiss fits the profile of the mysterious Ales.

### **IF NOT HISS, WHO?**

In reopening the mystery of Ales, we are addressing two questions: who was Ales, and what was Ales? We deal mainly with the first question, but with regard to the second, it needs to be said plainly that neither of the two Gorsky cables establishes Ales as a recruited or controlled Soviet agent. An emerging post–Cold War understanding of the complex nature of the conversations and interactions between Americans and Russians during World War II has room in it for a wide spectrum of roles, many of them honorable and patriotic.

With no particular candidate in mind for who Ales might be when we started this investigation, we spent hundreds of hours in the U.S. National Archives and the Moscow archives searching for clues to his identity. We gathered dozens of different State Department and Russian Foreign Ministry lists of all the Americans who traveled to Yalta, Moscow, and Mexico City in February 1945 — and later that spring to San Francisco. Nine American officials attended the Yalta conference and then traveled to Moscow. These included Secretary of State Stettinius; Edward J. Flynn; Major Terence L. Tyson, Stettinius’s military aide and medical doctor; Alger Hiss; H. Freeman Matthews; Wilder Foote, assistant to the secretary of state for drafting; and Stettinius’s secretariat of Lee B. Blanchard, George Th. Conn, and Ralph L. Graham. Ales must have been one of these men.

We immediately decided to drop Stettinius as an improbable candidate. Next, we dropped Edward Flynn — former chairman of the Democratic Party National Committee and President Roosevelt’s close political adviser, whom Roosevelt sent to Moscow with a special mission and who stayed back in Moscow after Stettinius and his party flew out on February 14. Now we must drop Alger Hiss. We also have to drop Matthews, who flew back from Mexico to Washington with Hiss aboard the secretary’s airplane.

We are left with a list of five Americans: Major Tyson; the members of Stettinius’s secretariat (Blanchard, Conn, and Graham); and Wilder Foote.

Tyson was a physician drafted into the Medical Corps in World War II who was only chosen to accompany Stettinius in early 1945. Other than accompanying the secretary to the conferences and to Moscow, as a medical doctor, he does not fit the profile of Ales. The youngest member of Stettinius’s secretariat, Graham, born in 1919, was only 16 in 1935 and a high school student in Philadelphia, and therefore far too young to have been the Ales who allegedly began “working” in 1935. Blanchard, born in 1914, was 21 years old in 1935 and a university student in Arizona until 1937. From 1937 to 1940 he worked as secretary for a broadcasting company and from 1940 until 1944 he worked for manufacturing

companies. He entered government service as secretary to the under secretary of state in March 1944 and transferred to the United Nations on July 1, 1945. Conn, born in 1913, graduated in 1934 from George Washington University. In 1934–35 he worked as an editorial clerk for a publishing firm, and from 1936 to 1941 he was an administrative assistant in a trade association. Neither occupation seems very fertile for intelligence gathering. However, Conn joined government service in 1941 (with the Lend-Lease Administration — a known target of Soviet intelligence), transferring to State in 1944 and to the United Nations on July 1, 1945.

The last person on our list, Foote, was 39 years old in 1945, and though he served as an assistant to the secretary for drafting, he has always been lumped into the impossible-to-be-Ales category. In his 2003 essay on Ales, Air Force historian Eduard Mark briefly described Foote as “a more plausible suspect” than Stettinius’s other clerks. However, he decided that “it is unlikely that Foote was so engaged while he rusticated in the farther reaches of New England.”

It makes sense to eliminate Graham because of his youth and Blanchard because he did not enter government service until 1944. That left us with just two candidates, Conn and Foote, both of whom went into government service in 1941, worked for the Lend-Lease Administration, transferred to the Department of State in late 1944, and later worked at the United Nations. Admittedly, Conn seems on the young side to have been working in 1935, and nothing about his jobs before going into the government would make him of interest to the Soviets as a potential spy. But Foote, who had worked in Vermont until late 1941, also seemed unlikely to fit the Ales profile.

At this point in our research, a piece of evidence turned up in Moscow.

### **THE BOLSHOI CENTRAL BOX**

VENONA 1822 reports that Ales was contacted in Moscow by a high-ranking Soviet official who “passed onto him their gratitude and so on.” Using both American and Russian archival papers, we have established the daily schedules of the members of Stettinius’s party during their two-day layover in Moscow. All of them stayed in Spaso House, the official Moscow residence of the American ambassador. Based on an hour-by-hour inspection of their whereabouts, the best opportunity for any Soviet official to convey his gratitude to Ales would indeed have been on the evening of February 13, 1945, when the American delegation went to the Bolshoi Theater for a performance of *Swan Lake*.

A document from the Russian archives strongly suggests that it was on this occasion that Ales was thanked. The working Soviet diplomatic protocol listed the people invited to the Bolshoi central box on that evening. Eleven Russians and 13 Americans were to sit together in the central box — a grand box right in the center of the house, nearly three tiers in height and draped in red brocade curtains. Once designed for the tsar’s family, it can seat two dozen or more officials in its four rows of heavy red plush-and-gilt armchairs.

The American list included Stettinius, Ambassador Averell Harriman and his daughter, Generals Dean, Hill, Roberts, and Spaulding, Admiral Olsen, Matthews, Hiss, Page, Foote, and diplomat George Kennan. The Russian list began with Foreign Minister V. M. Molotov, whose name was obviously added in ink and numbered “No. 1a,” with his first deputy Andrei Vyshinsky listed as “No. 1.” Molotov must have been added in order to upgrade the status of the Russian party. The list also included two of Molotov’s deputies besides Vyshinsky, Dekanozov and Litvinov; Ambassador Gromyko; Tsarapkin, the head of the U.S. department of the NKID (the foreign affairs commissariat); two other NKID officials, Chuvakhin and Fomin; and the chairman of the Moscow City Soviet, Popov. The only

Russian in military uniform was Col.-Gen. Fyodor Kuznetsov — the director of the GRU of the General Staff of the Soviet Army from March 1943 to September 1947.

Tellingly, the Russian list has a handwritten addition at the bottom of a column explaining that Vyshinsky had given last-minute instructions that someone named “Mil’sky” should be seated with the Americans.

Years of American scholarship have focused on the question of when and how Vyshinsky could have thanked Ales on behalf of the military. In fact, as a diplomat, Vyshinsky would never have agreed to decorate an intelligence source. According to interviews with retired KGB officers and diplomats, the GRU would have brought in its own operational officer to do this. And that is what happened. The GRU did the job all by itself, in a most elegant setting and in the presence of Kuznetsov, the GRU director himself. It was here that the “military NEIGHBORS,” as VENONA 1822 describes the scene, “passed on to him their gratitude and so on.”

“Mil’sky” was the cover name for Col. Mikhail Abramovich Milstein, age 44, who was without question one of the GRU’s most competent and sophisticated officers. Mil’sky was the name he used from 1935 to 1938 as an operative and later as the “rezident” or station chief in New York City. Under the same alias, he had also visited Canada, the United States, and Mexico in the summer of 1944. In 1941 and 1942, as head of the Intelligence Department of the Red Army Western Front, he had organized intelligence operations against the advancing Nazis. By the time this experienced spymaster entered the Bolshoi central box, he was deputy head of GRU’s strategic intelligence directorate. Milstein had attended the Yalta conference. One of his colleagues at the Military Diplomatic Academy in Moscow later recalled, “I clearly remember that he went to Yalta and was continuously present in the meeting room, since he had on contact a highly valuable source of information.”

Garrulous, articulate, and athletic, Milstein was a likable man, a great storyteller, and the heart of any party, where he could drink anyone under the table. After his retirement as a lieutenant general, he had a long and successful academic career. He was perfectly suited to convey the GRU’s commendation to Ales. But whom did he thank? Because Conn was not in the box, he must be eliminated. So we are left with one candidate — Wilder Foote.

#### **WHO WAS WILDER FOOTE?**

Henry Wilder Foote, born in 1905, came from a long line of New England farmers, sailors, and theologians. He went to Harvard — like his father — and graduated in 1927. That fall he went abroad to travel and study informally in Paris, Berlin, and Vienna. Late in 1928 Foote returned to America and on October 22 married Marcia Noyes Stevens, the daughter of a founding editor of *The Christian Science Monitor*. That autumn he got a job as a staff writer for the Associated Press in Boston. In 1931, he was still with AP, serving as a night editor. That year he quit and moved to Vermont, where he bought three weekly regional newspapers, which he edited and published for nearly 10 years.

When Foote took control of his main weekly, the *Middlebury Register*, it was a self-described Republican newspaper. Foote changed its affiliation to Independent. Through the late 1930s, as the specter of fascism threatened Europe, he became active in the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, a lobbying group chaired by William Allen White, the well-known Republican newspaper editor from Kansas. Foote’s membership in the group marked him as an ardent interventionist. According to his son, also named Wilder Foote, his father was a staunch admirer of Franklin Roosevelt. “My father was a lifelong Democrat of a liberal bent,” says the junior Foote. “He was a strong



supporter of FDR and the New Deal. His international views were definitely of a worldly nature, as he had been a [retrospective] supporter of Wilson's attempts to make the League of Nations a viable entity. He believed strongly that international recognition and cooperation was essential to world order instead of world chaos."

Recall that the Air Force historian Eduard Mark dismissed Foote as an unlikely candidate for Ales because, throughout the 1930s, "he rusticated in the farther reaches of New England." However, Foote was a cosmopolitan, an intellectual, and an internationalist. In fact, a well-connected journalist like Foote might have been of interest to the Soviets — even in Vermont. Soviet intelligence placed a premium on the recruitment of journalists whose work and broad contacts made them natural conduits of information and influence.

In November 1941, just before Pearl Harbor, Foote moved to Washington to serve as an information officer with the Office of Emergency Management. In 1942 he transferred to the Office of War Information (OWI), where he became its news bureau liaison officer. Among his other responsibilities, Foote was supposed to be in communication with William "Wild Bill" Donovan's Office of the Coordinator of Information — the predecessor to the Office of Strategic Services. A short time later, he was promoted to chief of the Lend-Lease and Combined Boards Section of the OWI. This job gave him access to information throughout the War and State Departments on Lend-Lease issues, a topic of prime interest to the Soviets, who were in desperate need of military supplies throughout much of the war.

By the end of 1943, Foote was promoted again, this time to head the foreign information programs (Lend-Lease). Although he maintained an office at OWI, he spent most of his time working for Stettinius, who was running the Lend-Lease program. Stettinius took a liking to the affable Foote and valued his ability to draft speeches and memos. On February 14, 1944, Foote quit his position at the OWI to become a special assistant to Stettinius, who was now the Foreign Economic Administrator.

In the autumn of 1944, Secretary of State Cordell Hull sent Foote to Britain, France, Italy, and North Africa to gather "first-hand information on the part played by Lend-Lease and reverse Lend-Lease in allied war operations." Secretary of War Henry Stimson armed him with a letter of introduction specifying that he was "authorized to obtain all types of classified as well as unrestricted information material in this field." Throughout these assignments, Foote served as a high-level government reporter. As such, he had access to plenty of military secrets and sensitive diplomatic information.

When Stettinius was elevated to secretary of state, Foote once again followed his patron. On January 24, 1945, he was formally promoted to be an assistant to the secretary of state.

In many respects, Foote fits the profile of Ales better than Hiss does. Like Hiss, he followed the Ales itinerary from Yalta to Moscow to Mexico City and finally to the San Francisco conference. But unlike Hiss, he was still in Mexico City when the March 5 cable says that Ales was there. He had access to high-level information from the time he joined the government in 1941. The Soviets would have been particularly interested in an official whose expertise on Lend-Lease issues was of vital interest to their war effort — not to mention one who became an assistant to the secretary of state in charge of drafting the secretary's, and sometimes the president's, speeches.

Foote was present at many of the Yalta meetings, often sitting immediately behind Roosevelt and Stettinius, who relied upon him to take handwritten notes in a black notebook. Foote was also the principal writer of the joint communiqué issued at the conclusion of the conference.

In July 1945 Foote left the State Department to follow Stettinius to the U.S. Mission to the

United Nations. When Stettinius resigned in June 1946 from the UN job, Foote became an assistant to his successor, Warren Austin. In August 1947, Foote left the U.S. Mission to the United Nations to become Director of the UN Secretariat's Press and Publications Bureau. Throughout the 1950s, Foote continued to work as a top aide to both the Secretary Generals Trygve Lie and Dag Hammarskjöld. He traveled widely with Secretary General Lie and became the United Nations's public spokesman and ardent advocate. He retired from the United Nations in 1960 at the relatively young age of 55, telling friends that he was moving to Maine where he wished to write and fish. After Hammarskjöld's death in an airplane crash in Rhodesia, Foote edited a collection of Hammarskjöld's papers. He died in relative obscurity in 1975.

Was Wilder Foote Ales? We have no unambiguous answer to that question, so we decline to do what others have done when they rushed to identify Hiss as Ales. Nevertheless, we have turned up a considerable amount of additional information that suggests Foote fits the Ales profile.

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Evidence from the Moscow archives indicates that the Soviets received leaked confidential reports from within the office of Secretary of State Stettinius. On March 19, 1945, Ambassador Gromyko received a memo from Stettinius titled "Preliminary Proposals on the Organization of the Conference in San Francisco." It looks as if whoever passed along the double-spaced memo had typed on the bottom of its last page a single-spaced paragraph that said: "On the secret agreement between USA and Holland for providing the USA naval and aviation bases in the Dutch West Indies, Holland has received from the USA a loan of 175 million dollars." And again, on June 23, 1945, at the close of the conference, Gromyko received "Materials sent from the Office of Stettinius," including a cover-signed memo and attached notes of an address Stettinius was going to make on the same day. Along with these two official papers, Gromyko obtained a one-page light copy of an untitled draft of a statement Stettinius was to make later that day to address whether the Provisional Polish Government of National Unity would sign the UN Charter — a topic of concern to the Soviets.

The leads in Russian files continue into the early Cold War period. We now know from archival files in Moscow that the Soviets had a very good source (or sources) at the UN Secretariat and probably in Lie's immediate circle. The so-called Molotov private-files collection, only recently declassified in Moscow, has produced a wealth of 1951 and 1952 reports flowing to Molotov, Stalin's longtime foreign minister, from the heads of all the Soviet intelligence services. In one of these reports, dated September 19, 1951, the head of the Soviet Committee of Information tells Molotov that six days earlier in New York there was a conference of the leading officers of the UN Secretariat, presided over by Lie, devoted to drafting new guidelines on the Secretariat employees. Similar reports could only have come from a source in Lie's inner circle. The Soviet source in the Lie office is not named in any of the released Molotov personal-file documents, but we do know from an FBI report that Lie himself told the FBI that Wilder Foote was "a very close adviser."

In our research into U.S. government files, we found that repeated investigations of Foote began in June 1941 — about six months prior to his government employment — and that he had a thick FBI file. When we first saw this file, it was heavily redacted, but some months later, we discovered unredacted copies of many of the FBI reports in Foote's Civil Service Commission (CSC) file at the National Archives. Both the FBI and CSC investigations revolved around Foote's various associations. This can be shaky ground, of course, but it can suggest how a particular person might have been introduced to certain ideas or activities. The history of Soviet espionage groups in the 1930s and '40s (most notably the Cambridge Five) suggests the importance of college associations in introducing left-wing ideas that sometimes led to the world of Soviet espionage.

At Harvard, Foote began several longstanding friendships that are interesting in this context. While he was managing editor of *The Harvard Crimson*, the editor was Frederick Vanderbilt Field and a member of the editorial staff was Joseph Fels Barnes. After graduation, all three traveled to Europe.

Field headed to London for postgraduate study at the London School of Economics, and his politics veered to the left. In his memoirs, he claimed to have been a Communist Party member, although Russian files describe him only as being "very close" to the party and that he was "generously donating money to several organizations close to" the Soviets. Documents show that he was in contact with various Soviet representatives in the United States beginning in early 1935. Some of these interactions may be described as "active measures" on behalf of the Soviet Union. Still, what we know does not prove that Field was a full-blown Soviet agent.

Barnes spent eight months of 1928 in the Soviet Union studying Russian and returned there in early 1931, writing for *The New York Herald Tribune*; he said his intentions for going there were to master his Russian and to "see what was going on." He revisited Russia in 1934 in his capacity as secretary of the American branch of the Institute of Pacific Relations. The Soviets regarded him as "highly left-wing." Barnes returned to Moscow in the late 1930s as the *Herald Tribune* bureau chief.

In 1953 Foote testified to an International Organizations Employees Loyalty Board hearing that he met Field in Berlin late in 1928 and saw him again "sometime during the 1930s." He downplayed the friendship, however, and denied being aware of Field's political views. Concerning Barnes, Foote told the board that he spent Christmas of 1927 in London with him and his mother and that he saw Barnes again the following spring in Vienna. Their associations in Vienna, he said, "were merely with the young Social Democrats of Austria, who were firm enemies of Communists as well as of the Fascists." Foote testified that after Vienna, their ways parted but that Barnes stopped by "once or twice" to see him in Vermont. He said he also saw Barnes in London in late 1945 or early 1946 and again at the United Nations in the late 1940s.

From our reading of Foote's FBI and CSC files, it looks likely that Barnes played some role in Foote's getting into government service. In the fall of 1941, Foote wrote to Barnes "asking about the possibility of a job in the Overseas Office for the Coordinator of Information." Foote knew that Barnes had been appointed to the New York office of this nascent, pre-war intelligence organization headed by William Donovan. It is telling that the first federal government job Foote applied for was with a precursor to the Office of Strategic Services and the Central Intelligence Agency. "[Barnes] sent me an interim reply," Foote said, "indicating there might be something later."

That Foote had such a history of friendship with Harvard classmates like Barnes and Field

should not, of course, be interpreted as evidence of guilt. Critics may charge that we are deploying against Foote the same “guilt-by-association” tactics used throughout the McCarthy era. We can only respond that having identified an individual who matches the Ales itinerary, we are compelled by logic to assemble as full a biographical portrait as possible of him. What are the threads of this man’s life story? What were his politics? And yes, with whom did he associate? Do Foote’s associations convict him? No. But they help to answer the question of how plausible a candidate he may be for Ales. Foote’s friendships with Field and Barnes, dating back to student days and lasting more than two decades, suggest at a minimum that he was not merely “rusticating” up in Vermont.

### THE FBI AND WILDER FOOTE

Allen Weinstein writes in *The Haunted Wood* of an encounter between Gorsky, the NKGB’s man in Washington, and Ruble (the cryptonym for an agent in charge of Ales) on April 2, 1945. Citing Vassiliev’s notes from Soviet intelligence files, Weinstein reports that Ruble slips a note to Gorsky while shaking hands. It warned Gorsky that an FBI agent had recently observed that a bundle of documents had been brought to New York, photographed, and then returned to Washington within 24 hours.

Judging by the character of the documents, only three people had access to them. One of these people is “Ales.” . . . According to Stettinius, the FBI agent told him such operations with documents had already gone on for 18 months, that in this manner, “hundreds and hundreds” of documents were withdrawn. Stettinius asked the FBI agent whether these documents were going to PM [a radical New York daily newspaper], to which the latter answered, “No, much lefter than this.” Concluding his conversation with [Ales] about it, Stettinius told him, “I hope it is not you.”

Weinstein asserts that Ruble could only have heard this story directly from Ales, the man to whom Stettinius had in dismay said, “I hope it is not you.” Weinstein assumes that Hiss was Ales. But this ignores something Stettinius wrote in 1949 in his book *Roosevelt and the Russians*: “I never heard of any questioning of Mr. Hiss’s loyalty from anyone inside or outside of the State Department or from the FBI during my time of service in the Department.” Clearly, Stettinius seemed to think he had no reason to question Hiss’s integrity. And given the closeness of Stettinius and Foote, the story fits Foote better than it does Hiss.

The items in Foote’s FBI file provide a glimpse of a man who appears to have been energetic, intelligent, and downright courageous, particularly given the growing anti-left political atmosphere of the late 1940s. Like many other civil servants, Foote had to cope with the stress associated with the anti-subversive investigations conducted by federal, state, and municipal agencies during the early 1950s, a period dominated by McCarthy’s headline-making searches for hidden Soviet agents. But in the end, the FBI’s investigators were unable to find anything that could cause Foote to be dismissed, let alone indicted. “McCarthyism was a problem for both my father and me,” says Foote’s son. “My father was on McCarthy’s ‘list’ but was never called to testify.”

Available American and Soviet files cannot resolve the issue of whether Wilder Foote was Ales, and the archival portrait we have of Foote simply does not paint a garish, McCarthy-era picture of a hardened Stalinist spy. The possibility exists that his interactions with the Soviets were sanctioned by his patron, Edward Stettinius, or by some other American government authority. But even without official sanction, Ales might not have thought of himself as a spy. After all, the Soviet Union was a wartime ally and many otherwise patriotic Americans thought that their government should be doing everything

possible to help the Russians in their war against the Nazis. Still, it is hard to imagine that the GRU would bother to place Milstein in the Bolshoi central box to commend a “blind” source and not an important asset.

A veteran GRU colonel, asked during a 2003 interview who Milstein met with at the Yalta conference, replied: “I emphasize: not an agent but a source of information, probably, a confidential contact at the Department of State who . . . had played a highly positive role in the development of Soviet-American relations.” When asked if that source was Alger Hiss, the GRU colonel became visibly irritated and insisted, “I have never heard of Hiss as an agent of [the] Kremlin from anybody.”

Wilder Foote’s mentor and champion, Edward Stettinius, who was not only secretary of state but also a former chairman of U.S. Steel, considered Foote to be a man of sound political judgment. Foote’s actions show him to have been a person of strong character. Friends described him as gracious, resolute, patient, hardworking, and modest in demeanor. He clearly believed himself to be a man of impeccable integrity, an idealist who dedicated most of his career as an international civil servant to building up the United Nations as a bulwark of world peace. If he was also a gentleman spy, he was excellent at his craft.

But it is important to remember that a decade ago a host of historians and intelligence officers hastened to proclaim the identity of Ales. It is clear to us now that they were premature. With this in mind, we must all be agnostics when it comes to Wilder Foote until the Russian archives open up. In the meantime, Wilder Foote’s son insists, “I am confident that the actions of my father will ultimately be proven to be above reproach.”

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**To read the expanded version of *The Mystery of Ales*, click [here](#).**

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*Kai Bird and Svetlana Chervonnaya are co-authors of this article. Bird is the co-author with Martin J. Sherwin of American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer, which won the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for Biography. Chervonnaya is a historian and TV documentary writer and producer with a special interest in the history of Cold War espionage.*

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