



Mark A. Bradley. *A Very Principled Boy: The Life of Duncan Lee, Red Spy and Cold Warrior.* New York: Basic Books, 2014. 384 pp. \$29.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-03009-5.

Reviewed by Kristie Macrakis (Georgia Institute of Technology)

Published on H-Diplo (June, 2015)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

A Red Spy That Got Away

It is hard to believe yet another American communist spy for the Soviet Union during World War II got away without any jail time. *A Very Principled Boy* is the story of a young idealist, Duncan Lee, who became a communist in his youth, was recruited by Soviet intelligence, spied for them when he worked at the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and spent the rest of his life fleeing successfully from prosecution.

While many American communist Soviet spies were caught and prosecuted after World War II, several got away. One of the most prominent examples of another escape artist is Theodore Hall, who was the youngest scientist working on the American atomic bomb. He was very young and very smart. He graduated from Harvard College when he was eighteen and by the time he was nineteen he was passing on atomic secrets to the Soviets. Unlike other famous atomic spies, such as Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who died in the electric chair, and Klaus Fuchs, who served time after confessing, Hall remained free until he died in Cambridge, England. Both Hall and Lee—the focus of Mark A. Bradley’s book—never confessed to espionage for the Soviets.

Like Hall, Lee was also young and smart when he started working for Soviet intelligence. While he was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University in the mid-1930s, he met, and married, a leftist woman, Isabella (Ishbel) Mary Ann Scott Gibb, who influenced him greatly. Although they both visited the Soviet Union during their time in

Oxford, Soviet intelligence—the People’s Commissariat of State Security (NKVD)—did not recruit him until after he became a member of the US Communist Party (CPUSA) in 1939 upon his return to the United States.

Bradley’s book is a biography of Lee and therefore starts with the life of his missionary parents and his birth in China. Bradley includes this information because he argues that his father influenced Lee’s psychology. In fact, Lee spent most of his childhood in China though he went to American schools. When he returned to the United States for good in 1927, he attended American schools and got into Yale University. The renowned Robert E. Lee was his great-grandfather’s first cousin; the fact that he was a descendent of one of America’s most famous families contributed a protective shield.

About halfway through the book, the story picks up speed, as Lee becomes a member of the CPUSA in 1939; joins the OSS in 1942; gets recruited by the Soviets in 1942; has an affair with his first handler, Mary Wolfe Price; and is then handed over to the infamous Elizabeth Bentley, who betrays Lee along with many other agents, to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

Although there are no details about his recruitment, Bradley shows how Jacob Golos, who headed up the NKVD’s espionage operations in the United States by operating through the CPUSA, ordered Price, his first handler and later lover, to recruit him after he joined the OSS

in Washington, DC.

Unlike other agents, Lee never passed on secret documents. He only transmitted the information orally to Price, and then Bentley, after memorizing it at the office. In this way, there was no hard evidence of his treachery. At hearings Lee continually denied spying for the Soviets. He said he only knew these women socially and did not know they worked for Soviet intelligence.

Lee was lucky that Bentley was sometimes dismissed as a disturbed crank. But he never knew that the American government had another source of information on his treachery: the so-called VENONA messages. The precursor to the National Security Agency (NSA) had successfully decrypted secret coded messages between Moscow and operatives in the United States. These messages also helped uncover the Rosenbergs and other Soviet spies in America. However, the source was not made public until 1995 (after Lee's death) and was not used in court when Soviet spies were prosecuted because the NSA did not want the Soviets to know they had cracked their codes.

Although Lee remained cool at the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings in August of 1945, he was shaking and nervous when the FBI first interviewed him. His nerves got the best of him later in life. He became an alcoholic (sometimes downing two to three martinis at lunch while working as a lawyer in New York City), had chronic anxiety, and became a chain smoker (he died of emphysema in 1982 and never gave up smoking though he stopped drinking). He also had numerous affairs while married to Ishbel with whom he fathered four children. Indeed, Walter Pforzheimer, the

Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) legislative counsel, said he "screwed more than a silkworm" (p. 98). Finally, even before the Rosenbergs's execution, he had insomnia and nightmares about being caught and executed.

Lee never admitted spying for Soviet intelligence during World War II. Even by the time he was retired and living in Canada with a new wife, he continued to bash Bentley for ruining his life. He even penned an unpublished, draft memoir stating as much.

Bradley, himself also a Rhodes Scholar, former intelligence officer, and lawyer, has thoroughly researched the book and tells the story solidly with occasional moments of suspense, such as when he ends a chapter with a cliffhanger like this one: "by Christmas, however, he found himself in greater danger than before he moved to Bermuda" (p. 219).

Bradley contrasts Lee to the recent CIA spy Aldrich Ames, who was successfully prosecuted for large-scale spying for the Soviets in the 1980s. While Ames spied for money, Lee spied for ideological reasons. This is true. However, most of the Soviet spies recruited in the 1930s spied for ideological reasons and many US spies recruited by the Soviets in the 1980s spied for money. He also thinks Lee was equally as important as an asset for the Soviets. However, he does not tell the reader anything about the other twenty-two sources the Soviets had in the OSS. It is therefore difficult to assess his importance in the context of all Soviet assets in the OSS or other intelligence agencies during the war. Even so, this is a valuable contribution to the intelligence literature on Soviet spies during World War II and what happened to them after they were discovered.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Kristie Macrakis. Review of Bradley, Mark A., *A Very Principled Boy: The Life of Duncan Lee, Red Spy and Cold Warrior*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. June, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43324>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.