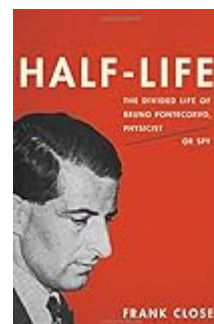


**F. E. Close.** *Half Life: The Divided Life of Bruno Pontecorvo, Physicist or Spy.* New York: Basic Books, 2015. 400 pp. \$29.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-06998-9.



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Spoiler alert: Bruno Pontecorvo was a spy. Or, at least, he probably was. As Frank Close explains it in *Half-Life: The Divided Life of Bruno Pontecorvo, Physicist or Spy*, his biography of the physicist, Pontecorvo is the prime suspect (p. 309) in two important Cold War espionage incidents. To believe he was not a spy involves far too much tortured logic and twisted reasoning; far easier, Close argues, to accept the simplest explanation—that Pontecorvo passed atomic secrets to the Soviet Union.

Pontecorvo worked on an Anglo-Canadian nuclear reactor project during World War II and afterward joined Britain's nuclear reactor program, until he infamously defected to Moscow in 1950. His colleagues, friends, and family in the West heard not a word from him until he emerged in 1955, stating in a Soviet newspaper interview that he had defected because of the West's militaristic atomic policies and harassment of leftists. He claimed that he had neither spied while in the West, nor assisted the Soviet Union with its thermonuclear program after defecting. He remained in Russia until his death in 1993. While no evidence yet links him concretely to espionage, the circumstantial evidence amassed by Close strongly indicates the exact opposite of Pontecorvo's claims, however.

Pontecorvo grew up in Pisa, Italy, with communist family members, when communism was seen by many as a defense against fascism. He studied physics with the legendary scientist Enrico Fermi, probing the rapidly evolving field of atomic science. After the rise of fascism disrupted Fermi's lab, Pontecorvo moved on to Paris where he studied with the ardent leftists Frederic and Irene Joliot-Curie. With his cousin prominently placed in the Communist Party, Pontecorvo was surrounded by communists and antifascists; he himself joined the Party on the day of the nonaggression pact in August 1939. (Notably, Stalin's deal-making with Hitler was a deal-breaker for many other communists.) After fleeing the Nazi invasion of Paris on bicycle, a trek richly detailed by Close, Pontecorvo relocated to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he used radiation detection techniques he developed to discover likely locations of oil. Although a member of the Communist Party, Pontecorvo raised no eyebrows until US agents, interviewing his wife in Tulsa, noticed a bookshelf heavy with communist literature.

When World War II began, Pontecorvo worked with British scientists at a remote Manhattan Project location: the Chalk River nuclear reactor in Canada. Close thoroughly documents how Pontecorvo repeatedly slipped through the net (p. 89) of security; British intelligence