

## THE GOUZENKO CASE

# The Documents That Weren't There

WILLIAM A. REUBEN

**L**ast March the publication of Soviet diplomat Arkady Shevchenko's memoir, *Breaking with Moscow*, an account of his secret life as an informer for the Central Intelligence Agency while serving as an Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, found its way to the front pages of the nation's press. The Shevchenko affair, coming in the midst of other spy allegations—the latest, the John A. Walker Jr. spy ring, as American as apple pie—has fueled the Administration's campaign to restrict freedom in the name of security.

Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger suggested that convicted spies should be shot. The House of Representatives passed a bill setting the death penalty for military espionage during peacetime and permitting polygraph examinations for as many as 4.5 million civilian and military employees of the Pentagon. Recently, there have been calls for wholesale revision of Federal security procedures, new restrictions on the Freedom of Information Act, a drastic step-up in counterintelligence activities and a C.I.A.-sponsored equivalent of the Official Secrets Acts of Britain and Canada [see Lois Sheinfeld, "Washington vs. the Right to Know," *The Nation*, April 13].

Not since September 5, 1945, when Igor Gouzenko, a 26-year-old code clerk in the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa, defected to the West, has a Soviet turncoat caused such a brouhaha. Yet the Shevchenko story seems to have begun to unravel. Edward Jay Epstein, writing in *The New Republic*, has identified a series of contradictions and falsehoods in the Shevchenko account which have led him to conclude, "Shevchenko's book is a fraud on the same level as Clifford Irving's fake about Howard Hughes."

The dangers of passing hasty "security" measures in an overheated political atmosphere should by now be obvious. (For example, the Internal Security Act of 1950—providing for, among other things, compulsory detention of "security risks" in time of national emergency—was passed in response to newspaper headlines about cold war spying.) But for those still harboring doubt, new evidence has just now come to light in the Gouzenko case that, at a minimum, should serve as a dramatic reminder of the importance of insisting on hard facts and documentation whenever cold war imagery of spies, espionage and threats to national security are invoked to justify intrusions on our open society.

According to the two-man Canadian Royal Commission that investigated the case in 1946, the secret documents

Gouzenko took with him pointed to the existence of a twenty-seven-person Soviet spy ring operating in Canada and other parts of North America. The apparatus's primary target, the commission concluded, had been the secret of the atomic bomb, which the spies were said to have obtained with stunning success. This winter, the evidence on which the commission based its findings was declassified by the Canadian government, making it possible for the first time to get a comprehensive look at the affair.

The Gouzenko case is cited by historians as a watershed in relations between the Soviet Union and the West, the end of wartime amity and the beginning of cold war distrust. It was no coincidence that Winston Churchill, when declaring that "an iron curtain has descended across the Continent," in his famous 1946 speech at Fulton, Missouri, placed the Canadian "atom spies" at the top of his list of Soviet perfidies. Other commentators, like Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in *The Vital Center*, said that Gouzenko's evidence made it clear that Communists' beliefs and speech were inseparable from "illegal acts" and thus threatened national security.

The standard view of the Canadian spy case, in terms of the damage to national security, is summed up by William Manchester in his social history *The Glory and the Dream*. The Canadian spies, Manchester wrote, stole "hundreds of pages of closely written data describing in detail" how to construct an atomic bomb. He concluded, "The Russians could scarcely have learned more about nuclear weapons had they been full partners in the undertaking."

What is not widely known is that all the published evidence for the existence of a Canadian atom spy network derives from the 733-page report the Royal Commission issued June 27, 1946. The men and women the Royal Commission identified as spies on the basis of "cover names" contained in the secret documents Gouzenko removed from the Soviet Embassy were tried for various offenses in the 1940s. But not one of them was indicted, tried or convicted of espionage—that is, of passing secret information to a foreign power—in Canada.\* Indeed, in none of the trials did the government allege they had stolen atomic secrets. Moreover, sixteen members of the alleged ring were cleared of all charges. Of the others, five were found guilty of a conspiracy to obtain fake passports to enable Canadian nationals to fight on the Loyalist side in the Spanish Civil War, and five were convicted of violations of Canada's sweeping Official Secrets Act. In the end, people went free or were convicted based on the degree to which they acknowledged their political beliefs and activities, not [as far as any documentary evidence shows] because of what Gouzenko's documents supposedly revealed about them.

Another nagging issue in the case is the credibility of Gouzenko himself. The accused were never confronted with

\*Alan Nunn May, who was accused of being a member of the ring, pleaded guilty in England. Under the provisions of Britain's Official Secrets Act, full details of May's confession are still not available.

Continued