The First Counterspy: Larry Haas, Bell Aircraft, and the FBI's Attempt to Capture a Soviet Mole
Kay Haas and Walter W. Pickut (Lyons Press, 2022), 371 pages, endnotes, bibliography, photos, index.

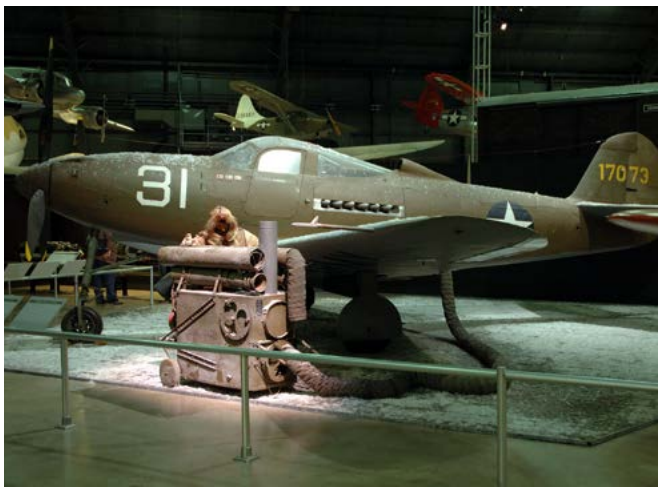
Reviewed by David A. Welker

I selected this book initially hoping to learn more about a spy case that bridged US counterintelligence's awkward transition from carefully observing the Soviet Union as an ally to intensely monitoring it as an enemy. As a native Western New Yorker, I also wanted to learn more about Soviet spying in my former backyard and more generally about the facts of this largely overlooked case. Sadly, this volume would disappoint on nearly every level.

The First Counterspy seeks to tell the story of how Andrei Ivanovich Shevchenko, a Soviet government representative managing Moscow's purchase of Bell P-39 Airacobra fighter planes during World War II, was in truth an NKVD (Soviet secret police) intelligence officer developing three Americans to provide him engineering and other details of the United States' classified jet-engine research project. Unfolding largely at the Bell Aircraft factories during the war's last years and early transition to the Cold War era, the book focuses heavily on Shevchenko's development of Bell Aircraft trainer and aspiring aeronautical engineer Loren G. "Larry" Haas. Father of coauthor Kay Haas, he joined with Bell technical librarian Leona Franey and her husband in cooperating with the FBI to uncover and expose Shevchenko's espionage. Although this case has been eclipsed by the more damaging and significant Soviet penetration of the Manhattan Project atomic bomb effort, it was featured in 1949 House Committee on Un-American Activities (HCUA) hearings, focusing on top level Washington decisions that enabled Shevchenko's early January 1946 escape from US justice by returning to Moscow.

The book is throughout an easy, sometimes exciting read. The authors take you along as Haas meets repeatedly with Shevchenko, and eventually the FBI, too, offering blow-by-blow details of the back and forth of his recruitment and development. That the book reads like a spy novel is both is greatest strength and its downfall.

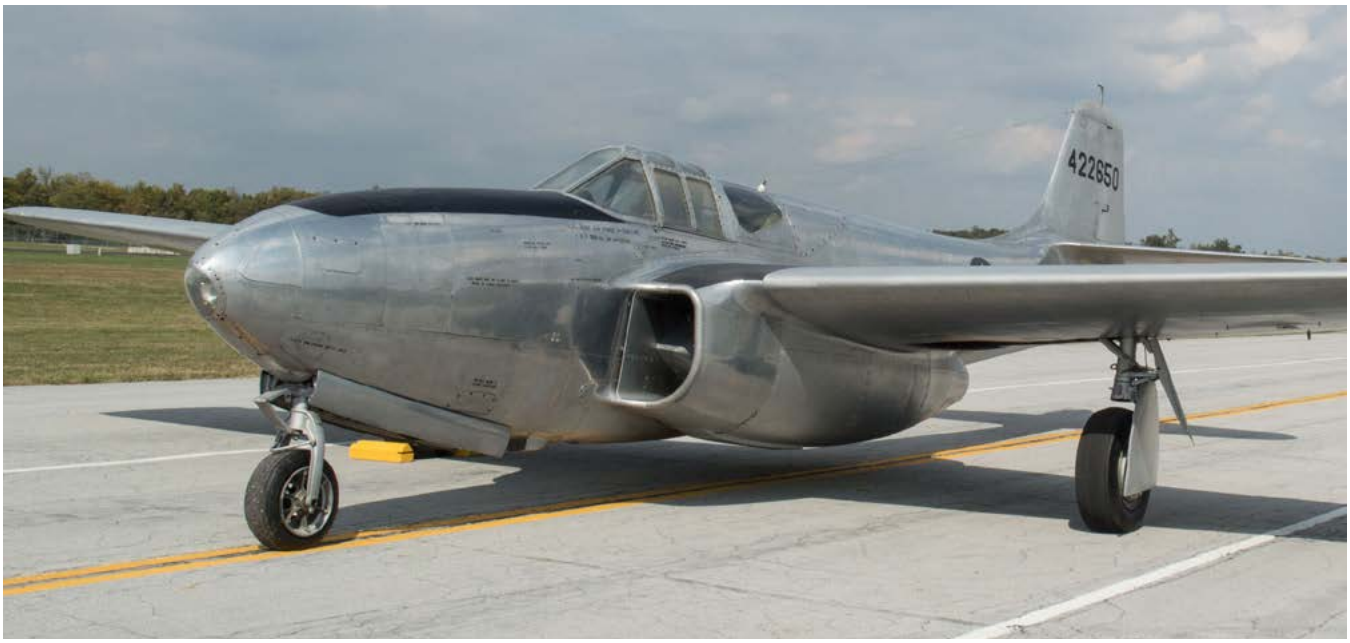
The first warning of trouble is that well-known intelligence issues and terminology are frequently used



(U) A restored P-39Q at at the National Museum of the US Air Force. The display represents the deployment of P-39s on Adak Island in the Aleutian Islands during World War II. (USAF photo)

clumsily or inaccurately. The cover alone bears two such examples, including the title itself. Haas was not "the first counterspy"—not for the US, the FBI, nor even this case—because the Bureau had long doubled agents back against Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and other nations, while librarian Leona Franey had been approached prior to Haas's involvement, both by Shevchenko and the FBI. Similarly, the subtitle "the FBI's attempt to capture a Soviet Mole" misconstrues Shevchenko's position; he was no mole—a recruited spy hiding within an organization—but rather an intelligence officer operating under cover as a Soviet commercial official. Frequently these errors seem to appear for sensational reasons, but regardless, they mar the text.

Most misleading, however, is this book's claim to be a serious work of history. First encountered in the introduction, this assertion is reinforced by the trappings of a history book such as endnotes, bibliography, index, and the back cover's descriptive tags "History/Military/WWII." Although there is actual history hidden within, it is concealed by a thick layer of outright fiction. Most glaring is the frequent fabricated dialogue that defies introduction and postscript claims to be grounded in FBI



P-59B at the National Museum of the United States Air Force, photographed while being moved into new display hangar, October 8, 2015. (USAF photo)

debriefing transcripts. Repeatedly the reader will ask "how can the author know and record detailed, extensive dialogue of two men meeting in secret nearly 80 years ago?" The authors' loose claims that this was shared by Haas with his daughter, who is implied to have remembered it to be recounted for readers, simply unravels as the book unfolds.

Most jarring is the inclusion of clearly fictional accounts and claims that grow more ludicrous as the book unfolds and wanders ever farther from the facts of well-known HCUA transcripts. For example, the authors claim Larry Haas twice met with President Truman—again, with detailed dialogue—so the president could personally impart Haas's importance and persuade him to remain involved when contemplating ending his FBI collaboration (in the authors' defense, an endnote admits one such meeting is completely made up). Most absurd, however, is the fanciful story that instead of Shevchenko disappearing home behind the Iron Curtain, he was murdered by Larry Haas, who secretly slipped aboard his Soviet ship in the North Atlantic. All this to pay him back for supposedly abducting his young daughter (the author) for use in leveraging Haas to become a full-blown Soviet spy. Although demonstrating author Kay Haas' adoring devotion to her frequently absent father, these and other clearly tall tales make the book impossible to accept as a work of history.

The account of Soviet efforts to steal technology behind America's development of a jet engine and aircraft that resulted in the Bell P-59 Airacomet (above), deserves to be told. So, too, does the real account of NKVD/KGB officer Shevchenko, whose real name was Andrei Raina and is noted as ARSENIJ and ARSENIUS in both the Venona recordings and Alexander Vassiliev's more recent notebooks of KGB records. Perhaps most deserving of an accounting are the actions of those FBI agents and their doubled assets, the Franeys and Larry Haas, who at considerable personal risk protected America's secrets. They still await a full and accurate treatment.

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