

Intelligence in Public Media

Sleeper Agent: The Atomic Spy in America Who Got Away

Ann Hagedorn (Simon & Schuster, 2021, Kindle edition) 259 pages, illustrations, portraits, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by J. E. Leonardson

Have you ever heard of an atomic spy named George Koval? Probably not, as he never achieved the notoriety of such major figures as Klaus Fuchs and the Rosenbergs. That's too bad because, as Ann Hagedorn's riveting biography of Koval shows, this Soviet intelligence officer not only played a significant role in stealing secrets from the Manhattan Project but slipped away and returned to the Soviet Union, where he lived to a ripe old age. *Sleeper Agent* provides a case study of what a determined service with talented officers can accomplish—midcentury Soviet espionage at its professional best.

Koval was born in Sioux City, Iowa, in 1913. His parents, Abram and Ethel, were Jewish immigrants from Czarist Russia who came to America to escape Russia's crushing anti-Semitism and build better lives for themselves. They also, not unusual for Russian Jews, believed in socialism and passed the secular faith to George and his two brothers. For his part, George was an excellent student, graduating high school at 15 and then enrolling at the University of Iowa's College of Engineering. There, as the Great Depression gathered force, he became active in communist politics. Meanwhile, Abram fell on hard times and, concerned by growing anti-Semitism in the United States, decided to take the family back to the USSR to settle in Birobidzhan, the administrative seat of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, the Soviet Far East. They arrived there in July 1932.

Birobidzhan was a miserable place, but George apparently worked hard enough that he won an award that enabled him to travel to Moscow, where he gained admission to the Mendeleev Institute (today the Mendeleev University of Chemical Technology of Russia). By then a Soviet citizen, Koval spent the purge years of the late thirties at Mendeleev, his faith in the Soviet system apparently undimmed as he excelled in his studies and married a fellow student. Graduating in 1939, he was immediately taken up by the GRU and trained to return to the United States where, with his native English and American mannerisms, Koval was to collect on military research into chemical and biological weapons. He arrived in San

Francisco in September 1940, and by January 1941 he was in New York City. Koval lived in true name though, of course, never mentioning his political activities in Iowa, years in the USSR, or Soviet citizenship.

In New York, Koval was handled by a GRU officer with an established network and, in the fall of 1941, enrolled in chemistry classes at Columbia University. By then, Moscow was aware of the nascent US atomic program and Columbia was at the cutting edge of not only chemistry but also physics. Koval's goal there, according to Hagedorn, was to "get to know the chairman of his department, who worked closely with the chairman of the Department of Physics, to learn about the breakthrough science surrounding him." Koval stayed at Columbia only long enough to make contacts and burnish his resumé and by early 1942, Hagedorn believes, may have expected to be recalled to Russia rather than be drafted and serve as an ordinary enlisted man in the US military. Instead, however, he remained in New York, working on war contracts at a small electronics company run by a GRU agent, until he was drafted into the US Army in February 1943.

Koval mixed lies and truth in his induction paperwork. He claimed his parents were dead (they were still alive and well in Birobidzhan), listed false jobs in Iowa and New York to cover his years in the USSR, and noted his Columbia coursework but, of course, made no mention of his Mendeleev degree, let alone his GRU training. The Army recognized his potential and after basic training placed him in a scientific and technical training program, which included engineering training at City College of New York. From there he was assigned in August 1944 to Oak Ridge, where enriched uranium was to be produced for the atomic bomb. Exactly how Koval was selected for Oak Ridge, says Hagedorn, has never quite been explained. She notes that some have seen the assignment as the result of some clever GRU machination but believes it far more likely that the army's bureaucracy simply made a sensible personnel decision. The one thing that is certain is that no one carried out more than the most cursory background check.

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Koval's job at Oak Ridge was to be a health physicist. These were the people, Hagedorn explains, who undertook a new type of work created by the bomb project—"measuring workers' tolerance to radiation, shielding exposure levels, inventing the monitoring instruments, and conducting chemistry lab tests." The job came with a top-secret clearance, access throughout the vast Oak Ridge complex, and close working relationships with the scientists on the bomb project. "So it was," writes Hagedorn, "that in the autumn of 1944, a Red Army spy was driving his US Army jeep daily across a swath of land in Tennessee at a crucial location in America's top-secret military project," while using his leave to meet his handlers in New York. Things only got better in June 1945, when Koval was transferred to be a health physicist in Dayton, Ohio, where polonium—the rare element used in the bomb's trigger—was produced at a facility operated by Monsanto.

There is little doubt that Koval was a successful collector. Citing GRU documents and histories, Hagedorn credits him with providing Moscow with details about the layouts of plants at Oak Ridge and Dayton, and methods for producing plutonium and polonium. This was "priceless information [that] eliminated certain time-consuming and costly experiments" the Soviets otherwise would have had to carry out for their bomb program. On top of that, Koval's information on health physics no doubt aided the Soviet effort, and his reporting also helped Moscow corroborate that of other atomic spies.

Alas, all good things must come to an end. Koval was discharged in February 1946 and, while an offer from Monsanto to stay on in Dayton meant that he had great professional and espionage opportunities, he knew better than to press his luck. With the urgency of the war now in the past, security checks were tightening, and the one for Monsanto no doubt would have found the lies Koval had told the Army. Added to that was the defection in Canada of GRU code clerk Igor Gouzenko in September 1945 and the start of the hunt for atomic spies, which meant growing risks every day he stayed in the United States. In October 1948, Koval packed his bags and by November was back in Moscow.

No hero's welcome awaited. Koval wrote a lengthy report for the GRU, but in the renewed paranoid, anti-Semitic atmosphere of postwar Stalinism, the service would not keep him. After his discharge from the Red Army

in July 1949, Koval returned to Mendeleev to work on a doctorate, which he received in 1952. Between being Jewish and unable to discuss his wartime work, however, Koval could not get a job; only after Stalin's death did the GRU pull strings to get him one at Mendeleev, where he taught chemistry until he retired in the late 1980s. Meanwhile, the FBI's espionage investigations ground on. In 1954, as part of the investigation of another suspect, the Bureau began looking for Koval and then uncovered the truth of his past and role. With Koval safe in Moscow, the investigation eventually petered out.

For more than 40 years, Koval taught and lived quietly, never saying anything about his wartime espionage. In 1999, however, he was retired, widowed, and—like so many Russians—broke, and so walked into the US Embassy in Moscow to ask about his eligibility for veteran's benefits. He turned out to be ineligible, but the GRU, most likely fearing the bad publicity of one of its wartime officers going begging to the Americans, dusted off his file, increased his pension, showered him with awards, and then wrote an official history of his case. Koval died in January 2006, honored if still somewhat obscure.

Sleeper Agent is an excellent intelligence biography. Given that Koval left such a vague trail, Hagedorn's main accomplishment has been to put the story together—her notes show deep research in both the Russian sources and FBI files—while still acknowledging where gaps remain and, as with the question of how Koval was assigned to Oak Ridge, distinguishing between fact and speculation. A journalist by training and author of several other books on history and current affairs, Hagedorn also is a skilled writer and her prose is clear and concise, which makes *Sleeper Agent* a pleasure to read. The only glaring flaw in the book is its title. Koval was not a "sleeper agent," a term so overused as to have lost almost all its meaning, but, rather, a serving intelligence officer.

It is hard to read *Sleeper Agent* without respecting the GRU's accomplishment. It was not just a question of spotting and training the right man for the job of overseas scientific and technical collection, but also of having the infrastructure in place to support him. Hagedorn's description of the GRU network in New York shows how well the Soviets prepared for opportunities that might come years in the future. It is a textbook case of the benefits of long-term thinking and patience for intelligence operations.

That said, the man at the center of *Sleeper Agent* remains a cipher. No doubt because so many of her sources are official files and the participants are long dead, Hagedorn gives little sense of Koval as a person. He was exceptionally intelligent, to be sure, but what are we to make of a man who, having grown up in the United States and then returned there for eight years, still remained loyal not just to the ideals of socialism, but to Stalinism? Did living through the Terror while he was at Mendeleev not have any effect on him? Did he carry out his mission and then return to Moscow out of loyalty to his youthful ideals or, perhaps, because he knew what would happen to

his parents, siblings, and wife if he did not? Did Koval, an American and a Jew who had spent years abroad, ever in his long life, think about the ironies of his parents' efforts to escape anti-Semitism or how lucky he was not to have been shot when he returned to Moscow? Did he never have any misgivings or doubts? Unfortunately, we will never know.

These are minor quibbles, however. For anyone interested in the history of Soviet and Russian intelligence, the atomic espionage cases, or just a well-written spy story, *Sleeper Agent* is a solid choice.



The reviewer: J. E. Leonardson is the pen name of a CIA intelligence analyst and a frequent contributor.