

Summer 2018

Maurice Halperin: From Sooner Subversive to Soviet Spy


Landry Brewer

Southwestern Oklahoma State University, landry.brewer@swosu.edu

Abstract

Maurice Halperin was a University of Oklahoma (OU) professor in the late 1930s and early 1940s when the state's governor and legislature began actively pursuing Communists in higher education. After Halperin fell under suspicion, he left the university for a job with the federal government's wartime intelligence agency. Still under a cloud of suspicion, Halperin eventually fled the country, never to return. Shortly after the Cold War ended, evidence... [Read More](#)

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/caap_general_articles

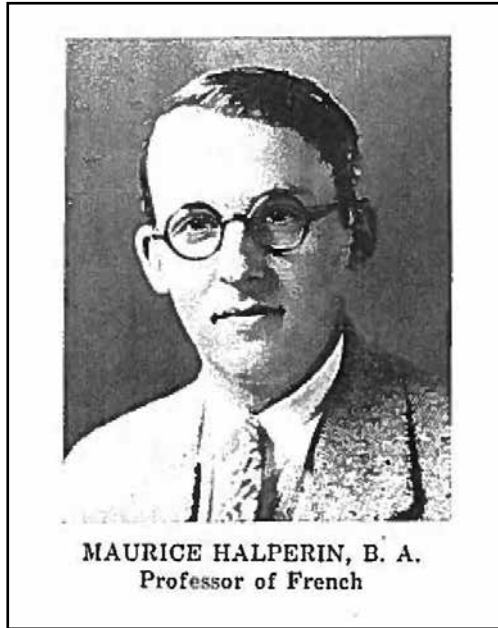
 Part of the [Military History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brewer, Landry, "Maurice Halperin: From Sooner Subversive to Soviet Spy" (2018). *Faculty Articles & Research*. 3.
https://dc.swosu.edu/caap_general_articles/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the General Studies at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Articles & Research by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

Maurice Halperin: From Sooner Subversive to Soviet Spy



*By Landry Brewer**

Maurice Halperin was a University of Oklahoma (OU) professor in the late 1930s and early 1940s when the state's governor and legislature began actively pursuing Communists in higher education. After Halperin fell under suspicion, he left the university for a job with the federal government's wartime intelligence agency. Still under a cloud of suspicion, Halperin eventually fled the country, never to return. Shortly after the Cold War ended, evidence emerged verifying the allegations made by his accusers that, during the 1930s, Maurice Halperin was a covert Oklahoma Communist who later betrayed his country by committing espionage for the Soviet Union.

Maurice Halperin graduated from Harvard in 1926 at age twenty having studied languages, and he took a job teaching French and Spanish for the high school and junior college in Ranger, Texas, near Fort Worth. After a year in Ranger, Halperin was accepted at the University of Oklahoma where he began graduate school in September 1927.

MAURICE HALPERIN

Roy Temple House was chairman of the university's Modern Languages Department, and he began a journal dedicated to writing English-language reviews of books that had been written in other languages, *Books Abroad*. Halperin published reviews in *Books Abroad*, and through the journal he was introduced to Marxism, which he admitted influenced him profoundly.

Part of the stuff that came in had very distinct Marxist orientations. This was the first time I got literature that had an explicitly Marxist analysis. It was fascinating, a new analytical approach, a new understanding of history. . . . intellectually it broadened my vision, especially of the contemporary world. Among them, books dealing with the Russian Revolution, which I never would have found on the stands in Norman. An accident, but I think it played a real role in my future development.¹

With a master's degree from OU in hand, in 1929 Halperin left Norman for the University of Paris to pursue a doctorate. While finishing his doctoral work in France in 1931, House offered Halperin a faculty position at the University of Oklahoma. Halperin happily accepted the offer to return to Norman and join the OU faculty.²

During the next ten years in Norman, Halperin studied Latin America and "at the same time, he began to drift leftward politically." In 1932 Halperin attended a speech delivered in Oklahoma City by Communist Party vice presidential candidate James Ford. Ford was black, and the crowd included both whites and blacks. "This was Oklahoma in 1932, and that sort of thing was simply not done there." Halperin was impressed with the message of equality that he heard.

I don't recall anything spectacular about it. It wasn't concerned with the overthrow of the government but with the rights of the poor. . . . I knew that this was a utopian little group here. Another thing that impressed me was the religious attachments that these people had to the cause that they were supporting. Religious almost in the literal sense because when they approved of something, they would shout "Amen!"³

As a young graduate student at the University of Oklahoma in the late 1920s, Halperin was introduced to the Marxist worldview. When he returned to Norman as a faculty member in the 1930s, he was introduced to Marx.

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

So I started reading Marx. . . . Marx made a tremendous impression and the impression had to do with maybe two or three things. One, his historical method seemed to throw a great searchlight on history. And number two, his critique of capitalism which I got not from *Das Kapital*, which was just too much for me, but from essays and interpretations by other people. And of course his ethical concerns were expressed in such a convincing way. It was clear that I was dealing with a huge intellect. He was a giant.⁴

Halperin wrote an article about exploitation of Mexican workers in *Current History*, and the article was quoted in a 1934 issue of *Time* magazine. As a result he was invited to accompany a group of leftists traveling from New York to Cuba in summer 1935 to explore allegations “of atrocities by Cuba’s strongman, Batista, in connection with a long-term strike there.” When he arrived in his room aboard the ship sailing for Cuba, Halperin saw an issue of the Communist Party newspaper the *Daily Worker*. He realized then that the fellows traveling with him were more than just fellow travelers—individuals who were sympathetic to Communist Party aims but did not join the party. “So I could see some element of the Communist Party was involved in this thing.”⁵

Because the trip to Cuba, including a brief detention of the ship’s passengers by Cuban police, was chronicled by passenger and leftist playwright Clifford Odets in the Marxist magazine *New Masses* shortly after the group returned to New York, word of the detention quickly arrived in Oklahoma. Just as quickly, University of Oklahoma President William Bizzell summoned Halperin to his office to explain his role in the affair. Bizzell reminded Halperin of the need for a good public image and ended the meeting without taking any action.⁶

The trip to Cuba among Communists put Halperin in the company of people with whom he increasingly shared a worldview. In the 1930s, he wanted the Democratic Party to oppose fascism in Europe, which caused him to support the foreign policy of the Communist Party USA. A supporter of FDR’s New Deal domestically, by 1936 he was, by his own admission, a fellow traveler. For two years beginning in fall 1937, Halperin regularly contributed to a faculty column, the “Faculty Forum,” in the University of Oklahoma’s student newspaper the *Oklahoma Daily*. He wrote mostly about the Roosevelt administration and world events, especially overseas fascism. Because the Soviet Union opposed fascism, Halperin gave Soviet leader Joseph Stalin a pass when the purge trials in the Soviet Union found innocents admitting guilt in supposed plots to undermine the Soviet government. Stalin,



*University of Oklahoma
President William Bizzell
(21171.50, Minneapolis
Public Library Collection,
OHS).*

he wrote, was preferable to his fascist counterparts. However, when the Nazi-Soviet Pact was announced in 1939, Halperin went strangely silent and devoted no column inches to the alliance. He also chose not to comment on the September 1939 Soviet invasion of Poland and the subsequent invasion of Finland. Then, in 1940, he stopped writing his column altogether.⁷

During these years Halperin was taking unpopular positions in Oklahoma, including supporting President Roosevelt's infamous court-packing plan that was ultimately rejected by the United States Supreme Court. Though the "press, the oil interests" and "most of the state Democratic party were ranged against the president," Halperin went on record and signed a petition of support for the ill-fated presidential effort. Then he began lecturing around Norman defending "the Mexican government's action in expropriating American oil properties" followed by statewide lectures defending John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* portrayal of the shabby treatment migrants received as they moved west after being forced off their land.⁸ All of these stances were much further left than those of most Oklahomans.

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



Robert Wood, November 8, 1940 (2012.201.B1381.0313, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).

In 1938 Halperin made a financial decision that haunted him for years afterward. He spent hundreds of dollars and bought Soviet bonds from the Chase Manhattan Bank to earn the 7 percent interest that was advertised, which was more than twice the yield of American bonds then. Then, after the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939, Halperin decided to sell the bonds. Chase Manhattan sent the money to Halperin's bank along with paper notification to pay him that amount. Suspicious, the bank notified the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and University of Oklahoma President William Bizzell. According to Halperin, he was accused of being a Soviet spy, though nothing came of the incident then.⁹

Robert Wood, chairman of the Oklahoma Communist Party, was tried in fall 1940 for violating Oklahoma's criminal syndicalism



Oklahoma Governor Leon Phillips (23139.G244, John Dunning Political Collection, OHS).

act. This was a microcosm, however, of nationwide anti-Communist sentiment that was seen in the actions of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), a Congressional committee chaired by Martin Dies of Texas. States like Oklahoma created their own versions of HUAC, dubbed “Little Dies Committees,” to investigate local un-American activities, which, along with the conviction of Wood, alarmed state liberals and radicals. This fear that civil liberties were under attack was the impetus for the formation of the Oklahoma Federation for Constitutional Rights in October 1940. One of the executive committee members was Maurice Halperin.¹⁰

Oklahoma Governor Leon Phillips claimed that professors at the University of Oklahoma in Norman were teaching Communist ideology, and he called for the firing of those professors in January 1939. Phillips’s accusations led many associated with the University of Oklahoma to call for an investigation. Professors there believed Phillips’s claim of subversives in their midst was based on participation by some faculty members in both the state’s Federation for Constitutional Rights and a state civil rights symposium.¹¹

While Governor Phillips sounded the alarm about state subversives, the Oklahoma Legislature also acted. In January 1939, Tom Knight,

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



The Dies Committee, December 15, 1938. Pictured as the final hearing closed are, left to right, seated: Representative Harold G. Mosier, Ohio; Chairman Martin Dies, and Representative J. Parnell Thomas, New Jersey. Standing, left to right: Representative John J. Dempsey, New Mexico; R. E. Stripling, secretary to the committee; and Chief Investigator John Metcalf (LOC Control No. 2016874551, Harris and Ewing Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC).

state house member from Claremore, “authored a bill making it a crime to participate in any sit-down strike or teach un-American theories of government.” Then, in a February joint meeting of the state legislature, and with Governor Phillips and Lieutenant Governor James Berry in the audience, the American Legion’s national commander “called for a ‘purge’ of professors who teach subversive doctrine such as communism or fascism, so America can achieve internal peace.”¹²

Two events in 1940 triggered energetic anti-Communist reactions from the governor and, once the legislature was back in session in 1941, from that body as well. A constitutional rights conference was held November 15, 1940, in Oklahoma City. Three days before the event was scheduled, Phillips held a press conference and warned University of Oklahoma faculty members not to attend. “The six professors scheduled to attend the conference included Dr. Charles M. Perry, Dr. John F. Bender, Dean Nicholas Comfort, Dr. Maurice Halperin, Dr. J. Rud

Nielson, and Dr. Willard Z. Park.” Most of those men were subpoenaed when the legislature met in January 1941 and investigated “subversive groups throughout the state.”¹³

During the legislature’s first week in session, House Bill 17, prohibiting Communist Party members from appearing on state ballots, was passed by the full house 118–0. However, the Oklahoma Federation for Constitutional Rights insisted the bill receive a public hearing. Unhappy with the state legislature’s aggressive attempt to curb the rights of perceived subversives in early 1941, leaders of the Oklahoma Federation of Constitutional Rights forced a showdown with the legislature. “On January 23 . . . two University of Oklahoma (OU) professors, W. C. Randels (mathematics) and Maurice Halperin (Romance languages), appeared uninvited at a meeting of the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections to press for hearings on the anticommunist bills.” Halperin maintained that the federation did not intend to uphold Communism, but instead to protect the political rights of all Oklahomans. At the end of January, State Senator Joe Thompson introduced legislation to begin investigating the Communist Party in Oklahoma.¹⁴

The committee tasked with the Communist investigation was the senate Committee on Privileges and Elections. The committee met for the first time on February 4, 1941, and seven University of Oklahoma faculty members were among the thirty-five individuals subpoenaed to testify. Governor Phillips was the first to take the stand, and he announced during his testimony that he had provided the FBI several documents concerning Oklahoma Communism in the previous two years.¹⁵ Oklahoma’s Little Dies Committee heard witness testimony throughout February. Testifying before the committee on the final day were University of Oklahoma philosophy professors Charles Perry and Gustav Mueller, education professor John Bender, and modern languages Professor Maurice Halperin.¹⁶

During his testimony, Halperin was asked if he knew any Communists, and he answered that he did not. He was asked if he was a Communist or had attended any Communist Party meetings, and he again answered negatively. He also denied that he “believe[d] in the Russian cause.” Then the committee asked about the 1935 trip to Cuba, and, as Halperin’s biographer relates, “his replies were more than a bit disingenuous.” When asked the purpose of the trip, he said “to study the culture, the civilization and the political situation in Cuba.” In response to a question about being arrested, “he replied that they had been ‘detained,’ and explained that the authorities ‘preferred we did not land because the situation there was rather tense. They feared for our safety.’” According to Don S. Kirschner, Halperin’s biographer,

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



Senator Pat McCarran of Nevada, March 11, 1940 (LOC Control No. 2016877254, Harris and Ewing Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC).

this was untrue. Additionally, though Halperin was asked who accompanied him on the trip, he failed to mention the Communist presence among his fellow travelers.¹⁷

After the investigation was concluded, the Little Dies Committee reported its findings to the whole senate May 7, 1941, and asserted that the Communist Party was “active in the state and engaged in the field of propaganda and agitation,” that more than thirty local Communist Party chapters existed, that total party membership exceeded one thousand, and that “Communists worked in all sections of the state.” One of the committee’s eleven recommendations was that the University of Oklahoma fire professor Maurice Halperin.¹⁸ The issue was resolved, however, when Halperin accepted a job as a “Latin American analyst with the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor to the CIA.”¹⁹

In 1946, amid souring relations with the Soviet Union, Congress was receiving information about Communists in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). One OSS official singled out was Maurice Halperin. Aware



*Whittaker Chambers, 1948
(LOC Control No. 95512199,
New York World-Telegram
and Sun Newspaper Photo-
graph Collection, Library of
Congress, Washington DC).*

of the allegation, Halperin decided to leave the OSS and take a job representing the American Jewish Conference to the United Nations. One morning that same year, Halperin read in Drew Pearson's nationally syndicated "Washington Merry-Go-Round" newspaper column that he faced indictment for espionage while with the OSS. Though startling, nothing came of this public allegation.²⁰

Halperin left the American Jewish Conference to take a job with Boston University in the Latin American Regional Studies Department. While in Boston, Halperin's life changed dramatically in 1953. In the era of McCarthyism, "the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (SISS) began its investigations under Democratic Senator McCarran in 1952, but it continued them under Republican Senator Jenner early in 1953." These hearings found several professors asserting their Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination during testimony, for which they were fired from their universities. Halperin was subpoenaed, and in March 1953 he testified before SISS. Asked if he had been a member of the Communist Party and if he had engaged in the kind of espionage activity that former Soviet spy-turned-informant Elizabeth Bentley had accused him of to the FBI and HUAC, as well as being

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA




Elizabeth Bentley, 1948 (LOC Control No. 94504253, New York World-Telegram and Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC).

asked about his political activities at the University of Oklahoma, his Cuba trip, the Soviet bond purchase and other matters, Halperin generally invoked the Fifth Amendment, though he did assert that he did not commit espionage.²¹

Shortly after Halperin's testimony, Nathaniel Weyl, an admitted former Communist, also testified before SISS. A New York City Communist, Weyl took a job in Washington, DC, in 1933 in the federal Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). While with the AAA, "he joined a se-

MAURICE HALPERIN

JOHN EDGAR HOOVER
DIRECTOR



Federal Bureau of Investigation
United States Department of Justice
Washington, D. C.
November 8, 1945

TOP SECRET
BY SPECIAL MESSENGER

DECLASSIFIED
E. O. 12958, Sec. 1.02 and 1.04, of 10/12/90
EXEMPT FROM AUTOMATIC DOWNGRADING AND
DECLASSIFICATION
By NLT/AGL, HARS Date of 02/07/96

Brigadier General Harry Hawkins Vaughan
Military Aide to the President
The White House
Washington, D. C.

Dear General Vaughan:

As a result of the Bureau's investigative operations, information has been recently developed from a highly confidential source indicating that a number of persons employed by the Government of the United States have been furnishing data and information to persons outside the Federal Government, who are in turn transmitting this information to espionage agents of the Soviet Government. At the present time it is impossible to determine exactly how many of these people had actual knowledge of the disposition being made of the information they were transmitting. The investigation, however, at this point has indicated that the persons named hereinafter were actually the source from which information passing through the Soviet espionage system was being obtained, and I am continuing vigorous investigation for the purpose of establishing the degree and nature of the complicity of these people in this espionage ring.

The Bureau's information at this time indicates that the following persons were participants in this operation or were utilized by principals in this ring for the purpose of obtaining data in which the Soviet is interested:

Dr. Gregory Silvermaster, a long time employee of the Department of Agriculture.


Harry Dexter White, Assistant to the Secretary of the Treasury.

George Silverman, formerly employed by the Railroad Retirement Board, and now reportedly in the War Department.

Laughlin Currie, former Administrative Assistant to the late President Roosevelt.

Letter from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to Brigadier General Harry Hawkins Vaughan dated November 8, 1945 (FBI-S, box 169, President's Secretary's Files, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri, viewed on the Central Intelligence Agency website at www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/venona-soviet-espionage-and-the-american-response-1939-1957/part1.htm.

-2-



Victor Perlov, formerly with the War Production Board and the Foreign Economic Administration.

Donald Wheeler, formerly with the Office of Strategic Services.

Major Duncan Lee, Office of Strategic Services.

Julius Joseph, Office of Strategic Services.

Helan Tenney, Office of Strategic Services.

Maurice Halperin, Office of Strategic Services.

Charles Kramer, formerly associated with Senator Klugers.

Captain William Ludwig Ullman, United States Army Air Corps.

Lieutenant Colonel John H. Reynolds of the United States Army, a former contact of Galt Oshkosh, former head of the Soviet Secret Intelligence (NKVD) in New York, is also apparently involved in the Soviet espionage activities stemming from Washington, D. C.

In addition to the foregoing group in the Government it appears at this time that Mary Price, formerly Secretary to Walter Lippmann, the newspaper columnist and presently publicity manager of the United Office and Professional Workers of America, CIO, is also associated with the foregoing group.

The Government documents were furnished to Gregory Silvermaster, who thereafter photographed them and turned over the undeveloped, but exposed film to a contact of the Soviets


-3-

In either Washington, D. C. or New York City. In the past, it is reported, the contact man made trips to Washington, D. C. once every two weeks and would pick up on such occasions an average of forty rolls of 35-millimeter film.

Investigation of this matter is being pushed vigorously, but I thought that the President and you would be interested in having the foregoing preliminary data immediately.

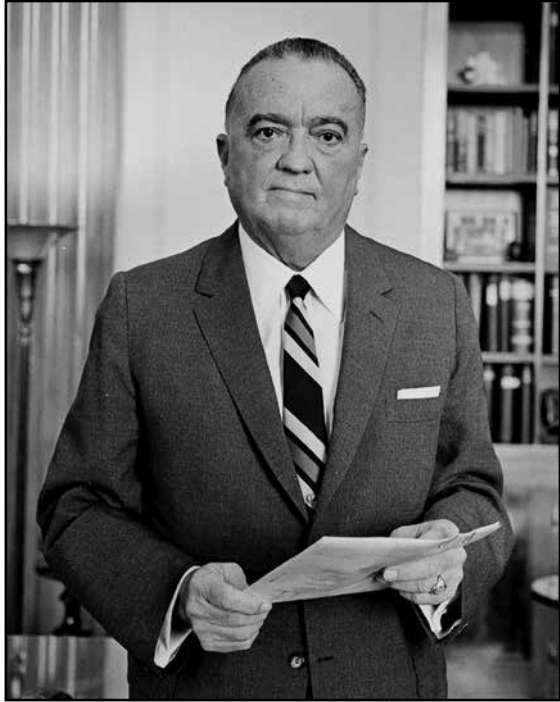
With expressions of my highest esteem and best regards,

Sincerely yours,
J. Edgar Hoover



THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

J. Edgar Hoover, September 28, 1961 (LOC Control No. 2004672754, U.S. News and World Report Magazine Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC).



cret Communist party cell, most of whose members were later identified by Whittaker Chambers. He left the New Deal in 1934 to work full time for the Communist party by organizing farm workers in the Midwest.” Weyl testified that he learned of Halperin through Homer Brooks who had worked as an official for the Communist Party in the American Southwest. Brooks told Weyl of Halperin’s having “been ‘accredited’ as the Texas-Oklahoma representative of the Communist party to the Mexican Communist party.” Even Halperin’s biographer concedes that Weyl was credible. The former Communist’s testimony supported charges that Halperin had been a Communist while a professor at the University of Oklahoma, his protestations to the contrary before the Sooner State’s Little Dies Committee notwithstanding.²²

In the fall of 1953, a story broke that drove Halperin from both Boston and the United States when, for the second time, he was publicly linked to espionage. This time, the accusation came from high officials in the federal government. On November 17, President Eisenhower’s Attorney General Herbert Brownell testified before SISS and read a November 1945 letter from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to President Truman “identifying a spy ring that had been functioning in Washing-



*Office of Strategic Services
Director William Donovan
(LOC Control No. 93517612,
George Grantham Bain Col-
lection, Library of Congress,
Washington, DC).*

ton during the war.” The substance of the letter came from a deposition provided to the FBI by Elizabeth Bentley, and Halperin was one of the spies named. The director of the FBI, through the attorney general of the United States, using correspondence that included the president of the United States, claimed that Maurice Halperin was guilty of espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union.²³

The next day, Wednesday, November 18, 1953, Boston University suspended Halperin, pending a university committee meeting the following week to clarify the issues in which he was involved. One week after his suspension from Boston University, Halperin and his wife, Edith, purportedly fearing for his job and his ability to gain other American employment should he be fired in such an uncertain political environment, left Boston for Mexico. If Halperin had been a liaison to the Mexican Communist Party as the Texas-Oklahoma representative of the Communist Party USA during the 1930s, as Nathaniel Weyl had testified, Halperin would have had contacts there.²⁴

Maurice Halperin’s life changed dramatically when Elizabeth Bentley accused him of being a spy for the Soviet Union. He denied her allegations, just as he had denied being a Communist in testimony be-

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

fore Oklahoma's Little Dies Committee in 1941 and before the FBI in 1942 and 1947, yet he fled the United States "and spent years of exile in Mexico, the Soviet Union, and Cuba, before settling in Canada."²⁵ Either Bentley lied or Halperin lied.

Elizabeth Bentley joined the Communist Party in the 1930s, and she began working in "its underground apparatus in New York" by decade's end. She answered to Jacob Golos, with whom she became romantically involved. Golos worked for the NKVD, a predecessor of the Soviet Union's KGB. During World War II she made contacts with employees of multiple government agencies in Washington, DC. After Golos died in 1943, she became leery of her NKVD superiors, and she became paranoid that the FBI would soon arrest her for espionage, so in late 1945 she went to the FBI and confessed.

She testified behind closed doors for a grand jury in 1947 and before two congressional committees (including HUAC) in July 1948, when her revelations became public knowledge for the first time. Eventually she named more than one hundred people, but subsequent investigations focused primarily on the more than two dozen who were still employed by the federal government when she began to talk to the FBI in 1945. One of them was Maurice Halperin.²⁶

Bentley claimed that Halperin had been a member of the Communist Party when he lived in Oklahoma in the 1930s. She said that when Halperin arrived in Washington, DC, after taking the OSS job, he and former University of Oklahoma colleague Willard Park contacted Bruce Minton of the leftist *New Masses* magazine "and told him that 'they desired to be placed in contact with some Communists in the East.'" Minton took this to Golos, who put them in touch with Bentley. She said that she first met with Halperin late in 1942 at Park's home in Maryland, "at which time she 'arranged to collect Communist Party dues' from him." Shortly thereafter, "Golos went to Washington 'and apparently made arrangements with them on that occasion to be supplied . . . with certain information to which they had access in their respective offices.'"²⁷

Bentley said that Halperin "passed along 'mimeographed bulletins and reports prepared by OSS on a variety of topics and also supplied excerpts from State Department cables to which he evidently had access.'" FBI files also included a letter from within the bureau to Director J. Edgar Hoover discussing this information, saying "that in Bentley's early contacts with Halperin 'he had apparently unlimited

access to what she describes as daily cabled intelligence summaries compiled by the State Department.” Bentley visited Washington every two weeks, and this letter states that “HALPERIN would have a two-weeks accumulation of such summaries and sometimes would turn them over physically to her, while at other times he would perhaps clip out a pertinent paragraph or two and hand it over to her.” Bentley also said that after OSS security was tightened, Halperin was forced to take greater care not to be discovered conveying this information to her, so “he ‘adopted the practice of personally typing digests of such information as he thought of interest.’”²⁸

Bentley told government officials that Halperin would occasionally come to New York where she and Golos would spend the evening with him dining and enjoying a show. She conceded that Halperin may have believed that the classified OSS information he was giving to her was destined for the Communist Party USA instead of the Soviet Union, though the law did not recognize a distinction. The Espionage Act of 1917—under which Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted in 1951 and subsequently executed in 1953—outlawed transmission of classified documents to unauthorized personnel, which means that if Bentley’s allegations were true, Halperin violated the Espionage Act. After their last contact in 1944, Bentley was told by a Soviet contact that OSS Director William Donovan confronted Halperin about being a spy, after which Halperin no longer met with his Soviet intelligence contact, and she lost track of him.²⁹

Kirschner sums up Bentley’s allegations against Halperin:

She had firsthand knowledge that Halperin was a member of the Communist party; that he paid party dues to her; that he passed along printed material from the OSS and the State Department from late 1942 or early 1943 until late 1944, approximately two years; and that he occasionally met her and her superior in New York City. She had hearsay information that it was he who had initiated the contact with Communists in Washington; that the material he gave to her was prized by the NKVD; and that Donovan was aware of Halperin’s activities by 1945, and had confronted him with them. She also knew that Halperin had been at Oklahoma University, that Willard Park had been there with him, and that Park was now employed in Washington.³⁰

From 1940 until 1949, the FBI kept a file on Halperin, though little in it backs up Bentley’s allegations. The file includes a May 1940 allegation from an anonymous Norman source noting that Halperin was “a

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

Edith and Maurice Halperin at their golden wedding celebration, 1976 (UNS76229 frame 13, used with permission of Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia. Copyright Simon Fraser University).



suspect in ‘espionage and Communistic activities.’” Hoover notified the FBI’s Oklahoma City office when Halperin went to work for the federal government in Washington in 1941, pointing out that he had been accused by many in Norman of having Communist beliefs. In February 1942 the FBI’s Washington office questioned Halperin under oath, and he swore that he had never been a Communist Party member. This echoed his testimony the previous year to the Oklahoma Legislature’s Little Dies Committee.³¹

In his 1953 testimony before SISS, Nathaniel Weyl said that Communist Party organizer for Oklahoma and Texas Homer Brooks told Weyl that Halperin was a Communist. Halperin told his biographer, Don S. Kirschner, that he had never heard of Homer Brooks. In 1993, however, Weyl provided further information to Kirschner that he had not provided in his 1953 testimony that included details involving his late wife, Sylvia Weyl. Weyl informed Kirschner by letter that, in the 1930s, Sylvia had

accepted the job of organization secretary (the no. 2 spot) of the Texas-Oklahoma district of the CP. When we went down to Mexico, Homer told her to take over Halperin’s job as rep to the Mexi-

can Party. She met with Halperin at our hotel. I seem to recall meeting him then, but was not present at her talk with him. She told me that he had been uncooperative and resentful at having been replaced.³²

In a follow-up telephone conversation, Weyl said that the meeting with Halperin was in 1936 or 1937. In his letter to Kirschner, Weyl wrote that even if Halperin was not a “card-carrying” Communist Party member in the 1930s, that distinction was irrelevant, because “the criterion for the communist movement at that time was not whether one carried a membership card,” because neither of the Weyls did, “but whether or not one accepted the discipline of the party and understood its ideology and line. If Dr. Halperin says he was never a party member, this may be a semantic issue without too much substance.” After Kirschner confronted Halperin with this information during the writing of the biography, Halperin claimed that though he had met Nathaniel Weyl while in Mexico conducting journalistic research, he never met Sylvia, and he was not a representative to the Mexican Communist Party. However, Halperin had previously told Kirschner that he had, in fact, met Sylvia Weyl, in Mexico. Whether Halperin was mistaken or lying, former Communist Nathaniel Weyl implicated Maurice Halperin in 1953, and again forty years later, as a Communist during the 1930s while Halperin was a faculty member at the University of Oklahoma.³³

Unfortunately for Kirschner, he did not have the benefit of information provided by Venona when he published his biography of Halperin. Venona was the name of a top secret American program begun late in 1943 to decipher encrypted messages sent from Soviet diplomats in the United States to Moscow. Its hidden fifty-year existence was revealed to the American public in 1995. These deciphered messages showed that the Soviet Union, though a wartime ally, had, since 1942, placed at least “349 citizens, immigrants, and permanent residents of the United States” as spies in the American government and military, including the Manhattan Project. Spies such as Assistant Treasury Secretary Harry Dexter White and presidential aide Lauchlin Currie were highly-placed American government officials. Another was Maurice Halperin. Venona showed that Halperin, while employed with the OSS, “turned over hundreds of pages of secret American diplomatic cables to the KGB.”³⁴

Venona corroborates Elizabeth Bentley’s description of Halperin’s espionage productivity. Halperin specialized in providing Soviet intelligence “sensitive dispatches that were furnished to the OSS.” In all,

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



Presidential aide Lauchlin Currie, July 17, 1939 (LOC Control No. 2016875960, Harris and Ewing Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC).

twenty-two decoded Venona messages detail Halperin's participation in espionage for the Soviet Union.

Halperin handed to the Soviets U.S. diplomatic cables regarding Turkey's policies toward Romania, State Department instructions to the U.S. ambassador in Spain, U.S. embassy reports about Morocco, reports from Ambassador John Winant in London about the internal stance of the Polish government-in-exile toward negotiations with Stalin, reports on the U.S. government relationship with the many competing French groups and personalities in exile, reports of peace feelers from dissident Germans being passed on by the Vatican, U.S. perceptions of Tito's activities in Yugoslavia, and discussions between the Greek government and the United States regarding Soviet ambitions in the Balkans.³⁵

In addition to compiling diplomatic information for Soviet sources, Halperin also slanted OSS reports to favor the Communist perspective.³⁶

Halperin's inconsistent answers about Sylvia Weyl were not the only contradictory answers that he gave his biographer. Halperin told the FBI in 1947 that he was not a Communist, had never met Elizabeth Bentley, and had never communicated with Soviet intelligence agents. Yet, Halperin told Kirschner in the 1990s that he had met with Bentley, but only in her capacity as assistant for Earl Browder, head of the Communist Party USA, and he never passed classified documents to her.³⁷

Soviet intelligence gave code names to their American assets and used those names in their communications. Halperin's code name was "Hare," and it was included in a November 23, 1945, message from Moscow listing thirteen agents with whom Anatoly Gorsky, a Soviet agent working in the United States, was to discontinue contact because of Elizabeth Bentley's confession of Soviet espionage to the FBI earlier that month.³⁸

The United States government was unwilling to reveal the existence of Venona, so prosecutors pursued cases against spies in the 1940s and 1950s without the Venona information. Without corroborating evidence, though, the government was often unable to bring those named to trial, much less get a guilty verdict. "Four of those Bentley named did testify, denied her charges, but then put themselves beyond prosecution for perjury by leaving the United States," including "Duncan Lee, Frank Coe, and Lauchlin Currie." The fourth was Maurice Halperin. Though Maurice Halperin denied Elizabeth Bentley's allegations about his involvement with Communism and Soviet espionage, Venona—which implicated Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, Harry Dexter White, and Alger Hiss, among many others, in Soviet espionage—showed that Bentley told the truth and Halperin lied.³⁹

Maurice Halperin swore under oath in the 1940s and 1950s that he was not a Communist, that he had never met Elizabeth Bentley, and that he had never made contact with any Soviet intelligence agents or spied for the Soviet Union. Bentley and Nathaniel Weyl, on the other hand, testified that Halperin was a Communist in the 1930s while he was a University of Oklahoma professor, and Bentley testified that he later engaged in espionage for the Soviet Union. Despite his denials in sworn testimony and to his biographer, Venona confirmed Halperin's Communist activity and Soviet espionage. Even if the search for Communists in Oklahoma and the nation was largely a baseless witch hunt—though Venona shows that that assessment deserves some re-evaluation—Halperin's case is an example of the aphorism that even a broken clock is right twice a day. Maurice Halperin was exposed as an Oklahoma subversive who became a Soviet spy.

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

Endnotes

* Landry Brewer is Bernhardt Instructor of History at Southwestern Oklahoma State University and teaches history and political science courses at the Sayre campus. He and his wife, Erin, have five children and live in Elk City. The photograph of Maurice Halperin on page 156 is from the 1926–27 *Ranger College* yearbook. Ranger College is located in Ranger, Texas.

¹ Maurice Halperin, quoted in Don S. Kirschner, *Cold War Exile: The Unclosed Case of Maurice Halperin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 17, 19–21.

² *Ibid.*, 23–24, 32.

³ *Ibid.*, 34, 36–37.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 39–40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41–42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 49–55.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹¹ George Lynn Cross, *Professors, Presidents, and Politicians: Civil Rights and the University of Oklahoma, 1890–1968* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 112; Eric Beu, “Leon Phillips and the New Deal in Oklahoma” (master’s thesis, University of Central Oklahoma, 2015), 46–47, 49.

¹² Beu, “Leon Phillips and the New Deal in Oklahoma,” 52–53.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 61–62.

¹⁴ Beu, “Leon Phillips and the New Deal in Oklahoma,” 64–65; Wayne A. Wiegand and Shirley A. Wiegand, “Sooner State Civil Liberties in Perilous Times, 1940–1941, Part 2: Oklahoma’s Little Dies Committee,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 85, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 7.

¹⁵ Beu, “Leon Phillips and the New Deal in Oklahoma,” 66.

¹⁶ Cross, *Professors, Presidents, and Politicians*, 124.

¹⁷ Kirschner, *Cold War Exile*, 60–61; Wiegand and Wiegand, “Sooner State Civil Liberties in Perilous Times,” 23, 25.

¹⁸ Beu, “Leon Phillips and the New Deal in Oklahoma,” 69.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70–71.

²⁰ Kirschner, *Cold War Exile*, 112–16; Thomas Mallon, “Washington Scribe: The Diaries of the Ultimate D.C. Insider,” *The New Yorker*, September 28, 2015, accessed May 25, 2018, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/09/28/washington-scribe.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 118, 127–29.

²² *Ibid.*, 130–31.

²³ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 134–35, 137–40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 277.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 278–79.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 279–80.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 280–81.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 281–82, 302.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 282.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 290–92.

³² *Ibid.*, 314.

³³ *Ibid.*, 315–16.

³⁴ John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 6, 8–10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 101–02.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 102–03.

³⁸ Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev, *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America—The Stalin Era* (New York: Random House, 1999), xxiii, 106, 256.

³⁹ Haynes and Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America*, 9–11, 15–16, 35–36, 90, 129–30, 160–61, 163, 170–73, 220, 223–24, 307–11, 331–32.