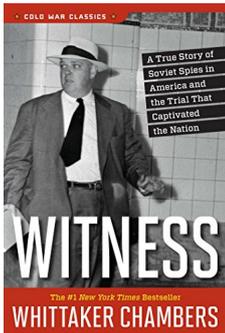


## Whittaker Chambers or Alger Hiss: Who's the real traitor?

Written by Eric Walberg Эрик Вальберг/ Уолберг □□□□□ □□□□□□

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Though #1 on the New York Times Bestseller list for 13 weeks in 1952, beloved of William Buckley and Ronald Reagan ("As long as humanity speaks of virtue and dreams of freedom, the life and writings of Whittaker Chambers will ennoble and inspire."), despite being hailed as "one of the dozen or so indispensable books of the century" (George Will), Witness quickly disappeared from our collective consciousness. We remember its most famous victim, Alger Hiss, as a nice guy who was mercilessly hounded, the prelude to the McCarthy purges of the 1950s, a gruesome stain on US history.

Chambers was a talented writer, penning popular short stories in the New Masses in 1931, a full time editor and journalist at Time

. His autobiography is full of details of both sides of the so-called treachery of the times, and Chambers' own ruminations about love and death and the whole damn thing. It swings from over-the-top self-righteousness to self-abnegation, maniacal zeal as a communist, then as a spy, then as self-proclaimed Mr Right, and woe to anyone standing in the way of his mission to Save the World from Communism.

Like his closeted father, his uncle and brother, all of whom committed suicide, he was possessed by a demon, which drove him to an early grave, working 36-hour days at Time in the 1940s, first doing book reviews, then editing the foreign news page (till he had his second heart attack), then back to books. His fellow journalists resented his new-found conservative attacks on their liberal New Dealer mindset, seeing them all as commie dupes. He immortalized himself destroying the careers of 'good guys', Alger Hiss and Harry Dexter White among many others, for their idealistic sins. He became a born-again Quaker, though, like fellow Quaker Richard Nixon, he still believed in 'just wars' against commies.

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### Victims

His worldview was apocalyptic, first through pink lenses, then puritan. Evil is the central problem of human life. The two opposing worldviews: man as flawed/ sinful (Christianity) vs man as good/ perfectable (enlightenment, liberalism -> communism).



We remember only Alger Hiss as Chambers' victim, but Hiss got off lucky. Chambers exposed Harry Dexter White (1892--1948), the senior American official at the 1944 Bretton Woods conference that established the postwar economic order, as a spy. White died of a heart attack shortly after HUAC hearings in 1948.



Hiss was sentenced to five years' imprisonment in 1950 (for perjury, as his 'crimes' were from 1938) serving only three years and eight months. While in prison, Hiss acted as a volunteer attorney, adviser, and tutor for many of his fellow inmates. Disbarred, he served as a lowly clerk until in 1975, he was readmitted to the Massachusetts bar, the first time a convicted felon was reinstated. The contents of the '[pumpkin papers](#)' were finally revealed as of no importance to state security.

Hiss insisted to the end he was innocent. Witness certainly reveals Chambers and Hiss as close friends for as long as Chambers remained in the party. What kind of spy was White?

“The economics White advocated were hardly Marxist. They were by this time what would be described as thoroughly Keynesian ... As for White's domestic politics, these were mainstream New

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**Deal progressive, and there is no evidence that he admired communism as a political ideology. White's daughters still strongly maintain his innocence.\*  
Chambers crucified Hiss and White merely for wanting to treat the Soviets as what they were -- allies, friends.**

### **Revenge**

**Despite his protestations of fighting evil, what Chambers really was after was personal revenge. He had believed and found his faith was betrayed by Stalin's crimes, which he now believed included wanting WWII and world conquest, though we must take his word, as there is no evidence of this in Chambers' Witness (or anywhere else, to my knowledge, beyond rhetorical flourishes). He quotes his own draft**

#### **Time**

**editorial 'Ghosts on the roof' about the Yalta conference in 1945, where he portrayed the Soviet Union and US as 'jet planes' flying towards each other, where one has to destroy other. This virtual declaration of war was removed before it was published, though the new Cold War theme remained.**

**His new Christian faith armed him for his heretical/ saintly battle against communists, despite his Time colleagues, who were all New Dealers riding high on the crest of WWII, when the Soviets were our friends. He made the transition from communist militant to communist heretic to Christian saint, always the mantra: 'how could one man be right when so many say he's wrong?'. Always the self-proclaimed martyr, forced to resign from Time, driving himself to an early death.**

**His original name was Vivian, his father an artist, a father in name only, so of course he was bullied, a lonely child. He ran away from home and found work tearing up street car tracks for a few months, his stint with the proletariat. Born in 1901, he was 16 when the Russian revolution electrified the capitalist world, and like idealistic youth at the time, he searched out those allied with it. He tried the Webbs, Fabian socialism, but 'there was no life there. The reek of life was missing.' To remake the world, socialism involved violent struggle to get and keep power.**

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**If you just read the first 300 pages of Witness, you can come away believing, like he did (but in his case, later with horror), that communism will triumph, despite the many horrors perpetrated in the name of the revolution under Stalin.**

**He explains three influences on him in his testimony to the grand jury's question 'what does it mean to be a communist': the Cheka founder Dzerzhinsky, who cleaned latrines in his Warsaw prison as an example to those less developed, the German Jew Eugene Levine, leader of the 1918-9 Bavarian Soviet Republic, when sentenced to death, who told his executioner a communist is 'always under sentence of death', and the Russian Narodnik Kalyaev/ Sazonov, who burned himself alive as protest against flogging.\*\***

**Witness is an indictment of both great faiths of our times, capitalism (sorry, 'freedom') and communism. Both are doomed. WWI led to the Russian revolution. WWII has led to the last stage of the crisis with the rise of communism as a world power. Here, war led to revolution. Now it's the reverse: revolution will lead to WWIII, launched by the communists to take control of the world. Wait a minute. Presumably capitalism/ freedom led to WWI and WWII. so now it's communism leading to WWIII? Chambers sketched out the dubious scenario that would dominate the US zeitgeist for the next half century, and which continues today in the 'war on terror', now expanded to include Islam. It seems war is alive and well,**

***sans***

**communism, and is the result of capitalism/ freedom.**

**We must always be on guard, as it is easy 'to fall into the communist trap: The vision inspires, the crisis impels.' Communism offers two powerful certainties: a reason to live and die. But this belies 'a shallowness of thought, and leads to incalculable mischief in action.' Though his argument is a pox on both houses, he retreats to the protection of the devil he knew first as the lesser of two evils, and exhorts us to seek salvation in religion, as the mistake was 'man without god.' One could never be a complete man without god. This is the fatal deficiency at the root of all the troubles of modern man.**



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Chambers literally thanks the Lord for delivering him from evil. He saw the light. Breaking with communism was a religious experience, as indeed it was for other renegades like him. Elizabeth Bentley went through a similar life journey, becoming even more central to HUAC's work, to the point that she became a full-time paid informer for the FBI. In 1948, like Chambers and Soviet defector Krivitsky, she has a spiritual awakening, becoming a Roman Catholic. She was frequently invited to lecture on the Communist threat by Catholic groups happy to pay her \$300 fee. Krivitsky suddenly was (presumably) murdered in 1939 before he could be baptized Episcopalian.

Chambers was convinced communism would triumph, explaining to his wife: we are leaving the winning world for the losing one. It is hard to take this seriously, given his litany of bungling, both petty and epic, of communists throughout the period. He heard about the Ukrainian famine in the early 30s, he knew first hand of the devastating purges, the Spanish civil war (i.e., the uncivil war of the Stalinists against the Trotskyists there), the rejection by the Comintern of a common front with social democrats in Germany in 1929, allowing Hitler to move easily into power.

This movement was poised to conquer the world? In *Witness*, Chambers claims he told Hiss of his doubts a few days before Christmas in 1938, just before breaking with the party. Hiss told him this was just 'mental masturbation'. Hiss knew where the real danger to the world lay.

Chambers claims Hiss forgave him his doubts and wanted to stay friends, giving Chambers a present for his daughter even as Chambers was telling him he was finished with communism. As Chambers was preparing to rat on someone who appeared to be his closest friend at the time, this sweet gesture brought tears to his eyes. Chambers was a hopeless romantic who fell out of love, lost his faith, sought revenge for its betrayal of him, and subconsciously drove himself to an early grave, a long drawn out suicide, a family trait.

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These intimate details about Hiss are convincing to the casual reader. Chambers was a talented writer. But he was also a talented storyteller, and there are strong reasons to doubt this supposedly nonfiction account in *Witness*. In [Working For -- and With -- Alger Hiss](#), Jeff Kesseloff relates how he befriended Hiss at the time he was reinstated to the bar in 1975, and together they combed files and put paid to the still widespread claims about Hiss. Kesseloff discovered that *Witness* was mostly fiction. 'Hiss seemed to pity him more than anything else, saying he was mentally ill and wasn't responsible for his behavior.'

Chambers' accusations do have the ring of truth, but it is a personal vindictive truth, which ran roughshod over others' lives in the cause of Chambers' personal mission to save the world. He understands that communism is the logical conclusion of the enlightenment, liberalism, 'Edwardian gluttonous pursuit of pleasure, secular good works, and progress,'\*\*\* but prefers staying at the level of gluttonous pursuit.

### The pumpkin legacy

Chambers and his acolyte McCarthy did their best to destroy the best of American life, the New Dealers with their ideals and openness to 'secular good works' without the gluttony. I would hazard that he did just as much, no, more harm than Stalin's very evil purging and hapless cat-and-mouse espionage. But Stalin's purging was primarily of Russian communists or suspected Soviet plotters. I can't think of one instance of real damage done to the West by Soviet spying. The Soviets were bound to crack the atom in any case, and, the sooner the better, given the anti-communist hysteria, when even Bertrand Russell toyed with the idea of a [quick nuclear war](#) before the Soviets had recovered from WWII.

In fact, Soviet espionage was far more benign than that of the US. The CIA and others parachuted defectors behind 'enemy lines' to sabotage industry, later [planted computer viruses](#) into equipment the Soviets were importing, poisoned progressive thought through media control. Proof of this is found in the so-called Mitrokhin Archives. KGB Major Vasili

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**Mitrokhin was for 30 years KGB archivist in foreign intelligence, and brought every conceivable secret when he defected to Britain in 1992.**

**Christopher Andrew's *Sword and the Shield* (1992) and *The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (2005), based on the archives show pathetically little in terms of subversion and no overarching plan to invade anywhere. Despite his anticommunist bias, Andrew shows that the KGB did little with the information it collected, which mostly involved technology acquisition, and which shows the reactive nature of Soviet undercover work—attempts to uncover sabotage by the West, use of blackmail to protect Soviet sources.**



**Canada's most celebrated Soviet spy was Fred Rose, Canada's one and only communist MP. In 1945, when the Soviet Union was branded as Canada's enemy, this led to the arrest of Rose and denial of his parliamentary immunity, when he was found guilty of conspiring to turn over information about the explosive RDX44 to the Soviets. The Soviet defector Gouzenko had stolen documents from the Soviet embassy, and alleged that Rose was leading a spy ring of up to 20 Soviet spies.**

**He was never allowed to clear his name, Rose did not see sharing RDX information at the time as spying, as the Soviets were allies, doing most of the fighting against the Nazis, but he was quickly convicted. When released, his health broken, abandoned by his wife while in prison, he was unable to work, hounded by the RCMP, and finally emigrated to Poland. In later years, Rose admitted his error, saying, "I made one mistake in my life and I paid for it," but he was denied the chance to clear his name of spying, as his Canadian citizenship was revoked in 1957, and his appeal was denied. Too late to matter, in 1958 Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Ellen Fairclough amended the Citizenship Act with the "Fred Rose amendment" so that such a removal of Canadian citizenship could never happen again.**

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**'The horror of treason is sin against the spirit,' Chambers wrote in reviewing Rebecca West's *The Meaning of Treason* for *Time* in 1947 (which, he boasts was read by 'a million more or less'). But isn't that what Chambers did? Hiss (sort of) betrayed (in the interests of world peace). But Chambers too betrayed. He betrayed his friends, and for what? Imperialism?**

**What about Forster's "If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend I hope I should have the guts to betray my country"? Especially if 'my country' is doing nasty things.**

**The muck of McCarthyism endures in our collective memory. Chambers' recounting of his HUAC testimony is, as he puts it, comedy. The committee members (including Nixon who became his 'valued friend') were the uncouth, undignified, ungrammatical, rude and ruthless, as no decent members of congress wanted to serve on it. They were almost uniformly bigotted, emphasizing Jewish names when calling and interrogating witnesses. The images we remember, if any, are of Lauren Bacall and others marching in protest at the blacklisting and jailing of actors.**

**It's hard not to pity Chambers, who saw himself as testifying for something, rather than against people who were once his intimate friends, that is, he was blind to the harm he was doing to them. The HUAC media farce couldn't help but portray him as the bad guy, even as the Cold War clouds were gathering. Those 'witnessing' the Hiss trials didn't really care much about microfiche spools in pumpkins (though that was entertaining). They were fascinated, appalled by fat, pompous Whittaker's tattling on, betraying his handsome, intellectual friend Alger, culminating in his sensational [interview on Meet the Press](#) in 1948, 'a savage assault with little restraint or decency,' 'fun for the boys, death for the frogs**

**'\*\*\*\* How could he stoop to this sordid business? To what end?**

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He admits that he was 'bringing ruin on the lives of so many people and ... would never again really be able to live with myself.' 'The penalty is a kind of death, most deadly if a man must go on living. He admits his witnessing 'destroyed himself to make his witness'.+ Hey, Whittaker, remember Stalin's 'you have to break eggs to make an omelette'?



He bemoans 'the death of religious faith', and takes shelter in Quakerism, but no one was listening. All they heard is the ugly HUAC clatter. Watched their beloved Hollywood stars like John Garfield, nice guys like White, dying of heart attacks as humiliated martyrs. My heroes are those brave enough to protest at the risk of their own careers (Lauren Bacall, Katherine Hepburn, Spencer Tracey, Humphrey Bogart....). The list of wonderful Americans who stood up to the anti-communist hysterics like Whittaker Chambers is long, and will be remembered long after Chambers et al are consigned to the dustbin of history.



### Spydom's legacy

Whether or not Hiss et al were religious, whether or not they 'sinned' by breaking the law, they showed far more 'spirit' than newly christianized Chambers and Bentley. The victims have been slowly rehabilitated starting in the 1960s with Dalton Trumbo openly credited with the screenplay of Spartacus (1960). In 2015, New York City Council issued a proclamation stating that "the government wrongfully executed Ethel Rosenberg," and Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer officially recognized, "the injustice suffered by Ethel Rosenberg and her family," and declared her birthday, September 28, "Ethel Rosenberg Day of Justice in the Borough of Manhattan." In March 2016, Michael and Robert (via the Rosenberg Fund for Children) launched a petition campaign calling on President Obama to formally exonerate their mother.

[60 Minutes](#)

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presented the story of the Rosenberg children and their quest for justice.

While Chambers was loudly lauded in his 1961 obits, Bentley (whose victims numbered 80) was passed over. Already by the 1960s, people were tired of the spy mania, and rightly, as the Soviet spies were (misguided?) idealists, each one a personal tragedy, shot down by traitors-to-the-cause. Few besides the Reagans and Buckleys remembers Chambers or Bentley et al as noble patriots, rightly, as they were (excuse me) rats escaping/ scuttling their ship, betraying their friends. It seems Hiss really was on Soviet spy lists, as revealed when archives were opened after 1991. Whether he was a 'card-carrying communist' and lied, I don't know and don't care.

I do know that such spies as Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, Rudolph Abel and Kim Philby are now admired and increasingly honoured for their idealism and courage. They spied in the interests of humanity, against imperialism. I'm with them. Eat cake, Whittaker.

Witness was dusted off for its 50th anniversary in 2002, with a foreword by William F Buckley, who recalls that only two years after its publication 'almost total silence had closed in on him.' In his foreword, Robert Novak, relying on Hungarian archives, harrumphs: So, the case is closed. Hiss was a liar, spy and traitor. But these inveterate Cold Warriors are wrong on all counts: communism was not the all-powerful ogre intent on war and conquest, it was wrong to betray you friends for believing what you did and then didn't.

Chambers' 'valued friend', Nixon, made detente with the evil commies his greatest legacy. As communism mellowed, it turns out Christianity and communism are reconcilable after all.

As the red scare and blacklist unravelled in the 1950s, the journalist who led the expose of Chambers in 1948, David Sentner, went on to arrange a visit by William Hearst Jr with Khrushchev in 1956, which [won a Pulitzer](#) Prize, leaving Chambers' plans to orchestrate the destruction of the communist 'jet plane' in shambles.

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So where is Chambers/ Bentley's legacy? Down there in Dante's Ninth Circle—the "lowest, blackest, and farthest from Heaven"—with real American traitors like [Jonathan Pollard](#) (who gave away lots of genuine secrets) sentenced to life in 1987, granted Israeli citizenship in 1995, who despite Israeli pleas/ whining, is still under house arrest after 28 years in prison. Now there's a real traitor -- for all but the Israelis, who paint murals and name buildings (in east Jerusalem) in his honour.



xxx

\*Benn Steil, *The Battle of Bretton Woods: John Maynard Keynes, Harry Dexter White, and the Making of a New World Order* (2013)\*\*Whittaker Chambers, *Witness*

(1952

),

Foreword as a letter to my children, p38.

\*\*\**ibid.*, p499.\*\*\**ibid.*, p702.

+*ibid.*, pp710, 693.