

Book Review

Scientists Under Surveillance: The FBI Files—edited by JPat Brown, B. C. D. Lipton, and Michael Morisy (Cambridge, MA, USA: The MIT Press, 2019, 413 + xix pp.)

Reviewed by James R. Russell

Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA

■ **THE VOLUME UNDER** review is a selection of declassified FBI documents, reproduced in facsimile, from the Cold War era files of 16 people (15 men and one woman) described as scientists. The editors do not explain their criteria for the choice of subjects. One, Mikhail Kalashnikov, was a Russian soldier who invented a durable automatic assault rifle, the popular AK-47. It is a stretch to call that science. Moreover, Kalashnikov never set foot in the United States. (A recently erected monument to him in Moscow had to be fixed since it showed him toting a German submachine gun. At least there was no mob, yanking it off its pedestal amidst howls denouncing Mikhail Timofeyevich's "white privilege" or "toxic masculinity.") Isaac Asimov had a degree in science (he and my mother were classmates at Brooklyn College) and was a professor of biochemistry but is famous as a popular writer of science fiction and books on science for the layman. Alfred Kinsey was an enthusiastic, hands-on researcher of male sexuality: more a sociologist than a hard scientist, perhaps. Timothy Leary did scientific research but is better known as an apostle of the counterculture whose

invitation to take LSD, "turn on, tune in, and drop out" some of you may remember. Though they say that if you remember the 1960s you were not there. The book, the editors note, is a companion volume to a similar assemblage of FBI files on famous writers that they published with the same MIT series.

The foreword, which is two-and-a-half-page length, focuses on a false allegation by the FBI of espionage against a Chinese-born scientist, in 2015, as an example of the dangers of official paranoia. While any injustice is to be deplored, the choice seems poor, given China's proven record of strategic and industrial espionage and massive intellectual theft. The Introduction features a quotation about liberty from Patrick Henry and other sentiments about intellectual freedom with which most scientists or scholars would probably agree. But there is no comprehensive discussion or analysis of the material presented, nor is there an index. Each section begins with a helpful one-page biographical cameo on the scientist under investigation. The principal problem of the book is that readers must pick their way through indistinct images of the heavily cut typescript and scrawled handwriting of original documents, and a great many of the documents reproduced are so faint as to be entirely illegible. Some pages are the empty reverse of a written obverse. Others are entirely blacked out: presumably this is the editors' way of expressing

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their indignation that secret documents really are secret. But this is not news, and it serves no useful purpose. (“Official secrets are for sharing,” was a dissident slogan that I liked when a graduate student in 1970s London: U.K. has a draconian Official Secrets Act that would be unconstitutional here.)

Albert Einstein’s FBI file runs to a thousand pages, of which 45 are reproduced here. Many of these are illegible. Most of those that one can decipher mention the great physicist’s friendships with what used to be called “fellow travelers” and his associations with groups that had some sort of Communist connection. Nothing was ever done to Einstein—he was not harassed, accused of a crime, or dismissed from his job at Princeton’s Edenic Institute for Advanced Study. The ten pages of Isaac Asimov’s file, which the Bureau opened only in 1960 (he and my Mom were fellow students in the mid-1940s), are heavily redacted and have little to offer. Asimov, who was born outside Moscow to Russian Jewish parents, suffered for his suspected leftist connections by becoming the most published science fiction writer in history and a multimillionaire. Timothy Leary, psychedelic guru, worked as an informant for the FBI on the activities of the Weather Underground, a 1960s left-wing terrorist group comprised mainly of rich white kids enamored of Chairman Mao. He did not suffer any serious repression either, and his file seems almost a quid pro quo, as does that of Alfred Kinsey, the Harvard grad who used FBI files for his own research. The Bureau seems to have taken a warm interest in Kinsey’s more arcane revelations about the sexual activities and proclivities of boys: his file includes careful, neutral reviews of his work that do not seem to have anything to do with left-wing politics or criminal activity.

Overall, “No further action” (a note concluding one file, on p. 255) might serve as a fitting epigraph to this poorly published, rather slapdash, soporific book—or as the epitaph to the editors’ presumed intentions, which are reflected in their lurid back-cover blurb: “Armed with ignorance, misinformation, and unfounded suspicions, the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover cast a suspicious eye on scientists in disciplines ranging from physics to sex research.” “As chilling as it is pertinent,” shrills Noam Chomsky on the front and back covers.

This reader failed to be chilled. What is in fact much more chilling is the treatment of scientists in the Stalinist USSR, which was the superpower rival of

the United States and its allies during the Cold War. Prof. Loren Graham, the MIT historian of science, published *Lysenko’s Ghost: Epigenetics and Russia* (Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2016); it is an excellent study of the way state-imposed Marxist ideology destroyed both genetics and the lives of geneticists in Russia. My mother, the first woman to be tenured in chemistry at the City College of New York, used to fume about being lectured to about Soviet versus “bourgeois” science by her father in law, who was a founding member of the Communist Party of the USA. (My beloved Grandpa was a publisher of rare scholarly reprints: American capitalism punished him by making him comfortably rich in his later years.) The Soviet NKVD, unlike the FBI, did not just question neighbors, poke around garbage cans, and assemble voluminous files on scientists: it arrested, tortured, exiled, and executed them by the hundreds and thousands. Some of the luckier ones were imprisoned in laboratory facilities called *sharashkas*, where living conditions were tolerable. Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s novel *In the First Circle* describes the life of the inmates of one such Gulag facility near Moscow ca. 1950. He describes how American magazines like *Popular Mechanics* were kept under lock and key there as top secret technical documents. Nikolai Ivanovich Vavilov, the great Leningrad agronomist who assembled the world’s largest archive of seeds, criticized Lysenko’s crackpot pseudo-genetics and for his opinions was arrested and condemned to death in 1941. He died in a Soviet prison in 1943. Ideology corrupted every field of learning in the Soviet Union. In the humanities, the all-powerful state favored the lunatic linguistic theories of Nicholas Marr; in the arts, it imposed the deadening orthodoxy of “socialist realism.” By contrast, America, even at the height of the McCarthy era, was the home of abstract expressionism—and New York, a haven for painters, sculptors, and composers fleeing European fascism, had become the art capital of the world.

As to the pertinence of which Chomsky speaks, one might indeed compare the darkest moments of the Cold War to the present day, not in Russia but here at home. At the time of this writing, innumerable American writers, artists, scientists, mathematicians, and teachers are being hounded out of private and public institutions on the basis of denunciations about “micro-aggressions” and other innocuous peccadilloes. Authors of scholarly books and articles are

required to embrace the ideology of gender indeterminacy and queer studies, of “white privilege,” “toxic masculinity,” “post-colonialism,” and so on, or face all the dire consequences of the “cancel” culture: expulsion from learned societies, inability to publish, public censure, loss of job. Twitter has become the 21st-century equivalent of the Salem witch trials. Ceaseless inquisitions by Title IX deans, given carte blanche to terrorize faculty, often on the basis of the flimsiest charges by disgruntled students or malicious colleagues, have destroyed what little is left of academic freedom in this country. The list of shattered lives grows longer every day, in a leftist reign of terror that makes the McCarthy period in retrospect look like “Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm” (see <https://theartifacts.com/hostis-publicus/>) One of the professors in this online list of enemies of the people, which is regularly updated, has committed suicide. Chomsky himself signed an open letter published in July 2020 decrying the present left-wing reign of terror (<https://harpers.org/a-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/>). Social justice warrior nonentities subsequently launched an *ad hominem* attack on Chomsky and the other luminaries who had published the letter, suggesting that the very fact of their “privilege” rendered them ineligible to speak in public. The signatories to the letter were not moguls or wealthy heiresses, mind you, but people like J. K. Rowling, a writer who rose to prominence from poverty by dint of creative genius and hard work. Thus, according to the criterion of the crusaders for “social justice” only someone (a politically correct someone) who has never worked to achieve anything, has never had an original idea and tested it by experiment, or has never demonstrated talent otherwise, has a right to talk, write, teach, or do scientific work. One imagines that even Trofim Lysenko and his fellow savants Beria and Stalin would balk at this. But it is happening in America right now, and, given the testimony of history, it should alarm every reader

of this journal: may I remind you that Stalin’s purges began with the show trials of engineers.

THERE IS A VERY good play on the McCarthy hearings, *The Investigator* (1954), by the Canadian Jewish playwright Reuben Ship. It was originally produced for the Canadian Broadcasting Company: the savage antics of the junior Senator from Michigan and his ilk appalled our freer neighbors to the north. The McCarthy purges decimated the entertainment industry and there are many fine movies about that aspect of the period, most recently *Hail, Caesar!* (2016), a darkly comic film by the Coen Brothers about the Hollywood Ten. Much research has focused on J. Robert Oppenheimer’s problems with Red-baiters. A scholarly study of all the scientists affected by the Red scare in the Cold War epoch of American history, based upon carefully researched archives such as the FBI files reproduced in the book under review, would be an important contribution to historical scholarship. Such a study, in the view of this reader, would benefit greatly from an appreciation of the historical context and the severe trials to which science and its practitioners were put, on the other side of the Iron Curtain at the time. But were the authors to compare the repressions of that time to those of the present, as this review does, their book might not be published; and if it were, it might imperil their careers. And that is the most chilling truth of all. ■

James R. Russell is an Emeritus Professor of Armenian Studies with Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA.

■ Direct questions and comments about this article to James R. Russell, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA; russelldeep@gmail.com.