

George Koval, pictured here as a chemistry professor at Moscow's Mendeleev Institute in the 1950s, led a double life as a nuclear spy.

ranks had been thinned by Stalin's purges. One Russian scholar quoted Koval as reminiscing, "I was twenty-six, energetic and obedient. I was what they wanted."

Koval, codenamed "Delmar," was trained as a spy in 1939 and ordered to recruit agents in U.S. labs with knowledge of chemical weapons. Once in place in the States he reassumed his American identity, allowing him to fly under the radar at Manhattan Project labs in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and Dayton, Ohio, where he ostensibly worked as a physicist monitoring the health of atomic lab workers. Koval received a top-secret clearance during a time when the demand for trained scientists overwhelmed the atomic labs' nascent security organization and protocols.

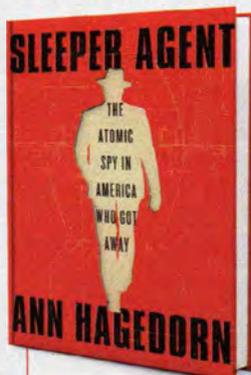
At this point, Hagedorn's story hits evidentiary roadblocks; qualifiers like "could have," "may have," and "possibly" appear frequently to fill in the major gaps of Koval's career in espionage. Clearly Koval, a physicist operating in a support role, reported observations back through his GRU handlers to senior leaders in the Soviet Union. But records detailing Koval's recruitments, his access to sensitive documents, and his reporting history—all critical to his legacy as an important Soviet atomic spy—are either circumstantial or nonexistent.

Authors writing about espionage frequently hit such roadblocks because their subjects—and the organizations they work for—are expert at obscuring their affiliations and accomplishments. It wasn't for lack of trying that Hagedorn came up short. FBI documents detailing the search for Koval, released through Freedom of Information Act requests, provide important context but no specifics on what information was stolen. KGB and GRU communications intercepted by a U.S. counterintelligence project known as "Verona" exposed other atomic spies, like the Rosenbergs, but were silent on Koval. Hagedorn also accessed Russian historians' research on Koval, but even they could not illuminate his role in hijacking atomic secrets.

The significance of Koval's espionage remains an open question. When Koval returned to Russia in 1948, one year before the Soviets detonated their atomic bomb, he arrived as a private in the GRU. Hagedorn

REVIEWS BOOKS

# SECRET WEAPON



## SLEEPER AGENT The Atomic Spy in America Who Got Away

By Ann Hagedorn.  
272 pp. Simon &  
Schuster, 2021.  
\$28.

"IT TAKES A SPY TO CATCH A SPY," said Tennent Bagley, the legendary CIA spymaster who led counterintelligence efforts against the Soviets during the Cold War. So what happens when spies aren't unmasked by fellow agents? They typically stay hidden. Such was the case of George Koval, a Soviet spy who infiltrated the Manhattan Project and is the subject of journalist and author Ann Hagedorn's new book, *Sleeper Agent: The Atomic Spy in America Who Got Away*.

The story begins in 1910, when Koval's parents—Socialist-leaning Russian Jews—emigrated to rural Sioux City, Iowa, in search of a better life. That hope vanished when the United States plunged into the Great Depression and financial depravation and economic competition exposed the family to bigotry and anti-Semitism.

By 1932 the Koval family had had enough and took a steamer back to their homeland. Their 18-year-old son, George, who had joined the Young Communist League in America and espoused a utopian vision of the Soviet Union, saw education as a way to get ahead and began studying chemistry in Moscow. He excelled academically and drew the attention of the GRU, Soviet military intelligence, whose

claims that being a Jew limited Koval from “receiving a high GRU post or even minor recognition” for his efforts. Perhaps, but Ursula Kuczynski, a Jew *and* a woman, served as the handler for atomic spy Klaus Fuchs during World War II, returned from Europe to the Soviet Union with honors, and was promoted by the GRU to the rank of colonel.

Still, it’s hard not to be tantalized by an award that Koval, who died in 2006, received posthumously from Soviet President Vladimir Putin highlighting his unique status as the “only Soviet intelligence officer to penetrate the US secret atomic facilities...used to create the atomic bomb.” All this makes for intriguing supposition as to what Koval provided his GRU masters—and to her credit, Hagedorn acknowledges the story’s gaps. Still, a lack of evidence hinders a deeper understanding of this enigmatic “Sleeper Agent.” —*Craig Gralley is a former senior intelligence officer with the CIA and the author of Hall of Mirrors: Virginia Hall—America’s Greatest Spy of World War II (2019).*

(*Navy SEALs, continued from page 72*) an assistant secretary. The USS *Los Angeles* was a World War II heavy cruiser, not a battleship. And while then-Captain Arleigh A. Burke was indeed nicknamed “31-Knot Burke,” it was not because of his “boiler bursting pace.” Instead, it began as a teasing jibe earned when his combat-bound flotilla was slowed by a destroyer’s fouled boiler en route to November 1943’s Battle of Cape St. George.

Minor hiccups aside, Milligan convincingly demonstrates how World War II events and personalities shaped today’s Navy SEALs. After all, it was that same Arleigh A. Burke who, as a four-star admiral and chief of naval operations, later insisted that “our people [in Vietnam] will have to know...how to fight and live under guerrilla conditions.” In fostering the SEAL concept, Milligan concludes, “Burke stretched the Navy’s combat reach from the floors of the ocean to the edges of the atmosphere.” —*David Sears, a frequent World War II contributor, is currently at work on Duel in the Deep, a forthcoming book about a U.S. Navy destroyer in the Battle of the Atlantic.*

## REVIEWS PODCASTS



### We Have Ways of Making You Talk

#### WE HAVE WAYS OF MAKING YOU TALK

Al Murray, James Holland. Biweekly. Available on Apple Podcasts.

Hosted by British comedian Al Murray (right) and historian (and *World War II* columnist) James Holland, this show feels like listening to your two brainiest friends debate all aspects of World War II—from firepower to fashion—and offers a healthy dose of across-the-pond perspective.

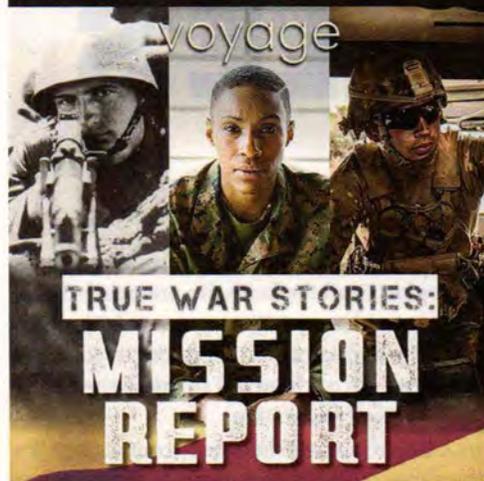


### BAND OF BROTHERS PODCAST

#### BAND OF BROTHERS PODCAST

HBO Max. 12 episodes. Available on Apple Podcasts.

It’s been 20 years since the debut of HBO’s *Band of Brothers* miniseries. This commemorative podcast offers equal doses of nostalgia and nuance, revisiting Easy Company’s exploits through conversations with cast members, writers, directors, and producer Tom Hanks.



#### TRUE WAR STORIES: MISSION REPORT

Voyage Media. Weekly. Available on Apple Podcasts.

Veterans’ formative experiences, recounted in their own words, are at the heart of this series featuring candid accounts from service members ranging from a World War II POW to a female Gulf War vet.