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New claims put Alger Hiss, subject of Cold War's most famous spy case, back under microscope

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NEW YORK — Scholars probing anew into the Cold War's most famous espionage case suggested Thursday that another U.S. diplomat, not Alger Hiss, was the Soviet agent code-named Ales.

Meanwhile, a stepson of Hiss said his chief accuser invented the spy allegations after his sexual advances were rejected.

The two claims, presented at the daylong symposium "Alger Hiss & History" at New York University, provided startling new information that, if true, could point toward a posthumous vindication of Hiss, who was accused of feeding U.S. secrets to Moscow and spent nearly five years in prison for perjury before his death in 1996 at age 92.

Kai Bird, an author who has done new research on the 60-year-old case, said that although Hiss was accused of feeding secrets to the Soviet military intelligence agency GRU under the code name Ales, there was new evidence to suggest the real spy was another U.S. official named Wilder Foote.

Bird said that he and co-researcher Svetlana A. Chervonnaya had identified nine possible suspects among U.S. State Department officials present at the U.S.-Soviet Yalta conference in 1945. A process of elimination based on their subsequent travels to Moscow and Mexico City excluded eight of them, including Hiss, he said.

"It left only one man standing: Wilder Foote," Bird said.

Foote, a member of a well-known Boston family, died in 1974 after a career as a diplomat and owner of a string of newspapers. During World War II he was involved with U.S. lend-lease operations supplying the Soviets.

The key, according to Bird, was that Ales' contact at the Soviet embassy in Washington would have known that Hiss, a top-tier diplomat who later played a key role in founding the United Nations, had returned from Mexico City, whereas Ales was known to have remained there.

That information was in a secret Soviet cable that was intercepted and decoded by U.S. intelligence agencies and is now part of the so-called Venona Papers, a collection of such documents made public several years ago.

In a telephone interview, Bird said that more research would be required to prove that Foote was Ales but that "he fits the itinerary in every way, and Hiss simply does not."

Telephone and e-mail queries by The Associated Press to Foote's son and grandson were not immediately returned Thursday. The grandson, a commercial pilot who lives in Belleville, Mich., was flying, according to his wife.

Bird quoted the elder Foote as saying earlier, "I am confident that the actions of my father will ultimately be proven to be above reproach."

Also Thursday, Timothy Hobson, an 80-year-old retired surgeon who was Hiss' stepson and grew up in the family home in Washington, D.C., said that Whittaker Chambers, whose bombshell allegations against Hiss broke the case open, had lied about his personal relationship with Hiss and had never visited the home as he claimed.

Hobson said that as a 10-year-old boy, he suffered a broken leg and was in a cast for months, during which time he met everybody who came calling.

Chambers was a former American communist party member who spied for the Soviets during the 1930s. He defected before World War II and accused others of being spies, but his claims did not attract FBI interest until after the war. He joined Time magazine in 1939 and as a writer and editor was a severe critic of communism. He died in 1961.

"It is my conviction that he was in love with Alger Hiss, that he was rejected by Alger Hiss and he took that rejection in a vindictive way," Hobson said.

Hobson said Chambers' sexual orientation had been mentioned in a book and was recorded in unreleased FBI files.

Hobson shared the platform with his younger half-brother, Tony Hiss, who has written two books that make the case their father was innocent. Hobson was close to tears as he said that he, as a gay man, was given an undesirable discharge from the U.S. Navy — and said that was what kept Hiss' defense lawyers from calling him as a witness in court.

"This puts it all on the record," Hobson said, to a partial standing ovation from the audience, including university faculty and students.

Among the speakers arguing that Hiss was guilty, author G. Edward White said Hiss supporters use a "thread strategy," seizing on any "inconsistency" to unravel a scenario aiming to vindicate him of the spy charges.

Whether Hiss was Ales need not rely on a single piece of evidence, White said. There is no reason that pieces of evidence must corroborate one another, and "we can't say that the absence of evidence is evidence," White said.

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