



Clever Girl: Elizabeth Bentley, the Spy Who Ushered in the McCarthy Era

Lauren Kessler

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Communists vilified her as a raging neurotic. Leftists dismissed her as a confused idealist. Her family pitied her as an exploited lover. Some said she was a traitor, a stooge, a mercenary and a grandstander. To others she was a true American heroine—fearless, principled, bold and resolute. Congressional committees loved her. The FBI hailed her as an avenging angel. The Catholics embraced her. But the fact is, more than half a century after she captured the headlines as the "Red Spy Queen," Elizabeth Bentley remains a mystery.

New England-born, conservatively raised, and Vassar-educated, Bentley was groomed for a quiet life, a small life, which she explored briefly in the 1920s as a teacher, instructing well-heeled young women on the beauty of Romance languages at an east coast boarding school. But in her mid-twenties, she rejected both past and future and set herself on an entirely new course. In the 1930s she embraced communism and fell in love with an undercover KGB agent who initiated her into the world of espionage. By the time America plunged into WWII, Elizabeth Bentley was directing the operations of the two largest spy rings in America. Eventually, she had eighty people in her secret apparatus, half of them employees of the federal government. Her sources were everywhere: in the departments of Treasury and Commerce, in New Deal agencies, in the top-secret OSS (the precursor to the CIA), on Congressional committees, even in the Oval Office.

When she defected in 1945 and told her story—first to the FBI and then at a series of public hearings and trials—she was catapulted to tabloid fame as the "Red Spy Queen," ushering in, almost single-handedly, the McCarthy Era. She was the government's star witness, the FBI's most important informer, and the darling of the Catholic anti-Communist movement. Her disclosures and accusations put a halt to Russian spying for years and helped to set the tone of American postwar political life.

But who was she? A smart, independent woman who made her choices freely, right and wrong, and had the strength of character to see them through? Or was she used and manipulated by others? Clever Girl is the definitive biography of a conflicted American woman and her controversial legacy. Set against the backdrop of the political drama that defined mid-twentieth century America, it explores the spy case whose explosive domestic and foreign policy repercussions have been debated for decades but not fully revealed—until now.

Clever Girl: Elizabeth Bentley, the Spy Who Ushered in the McCarthy Era Details

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?Eiman Jafar says

I was specially interested in William Remington's case, where he went after Bentley, passionately proclaiming his innocence, suing Bentley for Liable while the government did almost nothing to help her in this case because they didn't want to expose their "secrets". Reminds of the Supreme Court case and how men, in general, after women, by intimidating them and going after them

Rock says

Good in the first 1/2 but then redundant for the remainder of the read.

Joan Boysen says

It wasn't all McCarthy witch hunting

Born in 1951 I only became aware of the communist menace in the late 60s as it related to the McCarthy hearings and witch hunts. So I was fascinated to read this well documented book telling the story of American Communism and Soviet espionage in the midst of WWII. People in high places actively sharing government secrets with our war time ally. A real eye opener and history worth knowing, though I think all history is worth knowing.

Prof says

Amazing Story... But True!

This is an amazing book about a bigger-than-life person. I didn't expect much, but was pleasantly surprised. One thing after another happens... I couldn't put it down! I kept wondering... what can possibly happen next? Highly recommended!

Riley says

Elizabeth Bentley was a self-proclaimed Soviet spy who turned FBI informant. This book, while it is sympathetic to her, doesn't ignore her obvious, obvious warts as a human being.

People like Bentley are up for a reexamination, considering that access to Soviet archives has shown those they named were, often, involved in the things they claimed. That said, it is still hard to find them anything other than totally odious individuals.

I think the fundamental problem is pretty apparent: that with the passion of the converted, those informants placed their own sins on those they once called friends, though those people may have been far less culpable. Yet, the informant prospered through the confession, while the person named was destroyed. It just all seems so unseemly, especially when you consider the moral vacuousness of Cold War warriors like McCarthy, Dies, Rankin and Nixon.

Nancy says

This is the story of a woman who graduated from Vassar and became a Communist in the 1930s after experiencing fascism in Italy. Eventually the Communist connection led to her involvement with spying for Russia. In what seemed to be more self preservation than seeing the light, she "turned" and went to the FBI.

This book appears to be written based almost entirely on FBI records. The author reports that she moved a lot and had almost no close friendships so maybe there was no one to give any insight into her world outside of public testimony and FBI records.

I enjoy reading about history as seen through the eyes of bit players such as Elizabeth Bentley, but with so little about her non-public side, the book was a bit of a disappointment.

Johnny says

I found it a good and enjoyable read. An interesting look at the idealism and drawing power of the US Communist Party and the belief that helping the Soviet Union was for the good of everybody and how the paranoia and nationalism of Stalinism helped bring down an incredible large and effective spy network.

Eric Pollard says

I read this book because its subject, Elizabeth Bentley, listed among her sources in the Government two of my graduate school professor. They are alleged to have been part of the Silvermaster Group, the larger of the two spy rings Bentley managed for a brief period in the early days of WWII.

Kessler does a decent job of threading together the narrative, but avoids drawing conclusions about Bentley's motivations; it seems clear Bentley was disingenuous, perhaps mostly with herself. I'm left with a deep curiosuity as the the motives of the 30 or so individuals who participated in the espionage, and how those choices shaped their lives.

Sarah says

Meh. As Laura Kessler said about Elizabeth Bentley's own biography Out of Bondage, the material was good, but it's construction hindered my experience as a reader. She spent way too much time speculating and tossing in repetitive facts. The book could have easily been at least 1/3 shorter. But, the story of Elizabeth Bentley was interesting enough to compel me to finish the book.

Anna Nihm says

This one took me awhile to get through. The author obviously spent hours upon hours on research, but it was a bit dry. Elizabeth Bentley was an interesting woman. I just wished my Kindle version of the book contained photos or artifacts. It was definitely an interesting time in American History. I'm also glad I didn't have to live through it!

Richard Bentley says

I really enjoyed the book. I read it because she was my 5th cousin and I enjoy tracing my family tree. As well Red Spy Queen is another book about her, which is another one I liked. Elizabeth wrote a book about her life, which I haven't read yet. All in all she had an interesting life and someone I'd like to have meet and talked with.

One of Elizabeth's 5th cousins
Richard Lee Bentley Jr.

Heila says

It's the true story of a woman who directed extensive KGB spy rings in America and then later testified for the FBI and in public hearings. Gave me some good background on the history of communism in our country.

Kitty says

Interesting, but I didn't like how the author developed the story.

Kerry says

What is most striking about this book is Elizabeth Bentley's obvious need for attention and her potential mental health issues. When someone craves the particular type of validation sought by Bentley, it indicates a more complex issue than that posed by a "traitor" or someone "evil." Recruiters and handlers zeroed in on

Bentley's susceptibility and used it to their own benefit. While she certainly behaved in criminal manner, her motivations also appeared to be pathetically misguided.

Mylene says

Interesting review of spy activity during the 30s and 40s. I did not like Bentley at all as a person.
