

can operations in the 1930s, was chiefly interested in the United States not for its own sake but as a base for operations against the more important targets of Japan and Germany. In 1938 Fourth Department operations suffered a potentially serious setback after the defection of its main American courier, Whittaker Chambers.

For a time Chambers went underground, fearing assassination by the NKVD or Fourth Department and unwilling to invite prosecution by revealing his past career in espionage. In 1939 he reemerged in public as a writer (later editor) with *Time* magazine. Outraged, though not surprised, by the Nazi-Soviet Pact, Chambers agreed to tell his story on September 2, the day after the outbreak of war, to Adolf Berle, assistant secretary of State and Roosevelt's adviser on internal security. Berle assured Chambers that his information would go directly to the president and that he would not be penalized for agreeing to cooperate; but he stopped short of promising immunity from prosecution. After their meeting, Berle drew up a four-page memorandum entitled "Underground Espionage Agent," which listed Alger Hiss, Harry Dexter White, and the other leading Soviet agents for whom Chambers had acted as courier.

Roosevelt was not interested. He seems simply to have dismissed the whole idea of espionage rings within his administration as absurd. Equally remarkably, Berle simply pigeonholed his own report. He made no inquiries about Hiss until 1941, when he mentioned Chambers's charges to Hiss's former employer, Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, and to the diplomat Dean Acheson. Both dismissed them out of hand. Berle took no further action; he did not send a report of his interview with Chambers to the FBI until the bureau requested it in 1943. Among others who brought Chambers's story to Roosevelt's attention were Ambassador William Bullitt, labor leader David Dubinsky, and journalist Walter Winchell. Once again, the president brushed the charges aside.

Chambers was eventually interviewed by the FBI in 1942 after an erstwhile associate in the Communist underground identified him as a former Soviet agent with "more material than you could ever hope to get by running around for a year." Perhaps fearing prosecution, Chambers was less forthcoming than he had been to Berle three years before, stressing his underground Communist activity rather than his involvement in espionage. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover airily dismissed an eight-page report on the interview as mostly "history, hypothesis or deduction." There was no follow-up interview with Cham-

bers for the next three years. Of the individuals identified by Chambers, the FBI made cursory inquiries concerning only J. Peters, who was already in its files as a leading figure in the American Communist Party.³¹

After Chambers's defection in 1938, the main Fourth Department networks in Washington were taken over by the NKVD New York resident, Gaik Badalovich Ovakimyan, later christened "the wily Armenian" by the FBI.³² Henceforth the United States became a major (by the end of the Second World War *the* major) target for Soviet espionage rather than, as previously, a base for intelligence operations directed elsewhere. In 1938 the NKVD had not yet grasped quite how light-heartedly the administration still treated the issue of Soviet espionage in the United States. Chambers's defection and the fears it inspired of an FBI inquiry thus caused some inevitable disruption to NKVD operations in Washington. Harry Dexter White in the Treasury was the most senior of several agents who abruptly ceased supplying information. His wife, who did not share his Communist sympathies, made him promise to give up espionage.

The man who did most to resuscitate the Washington network of Soviet informants was Nathan Gregory Silvermaster (not to be confused with his friend and fellow agent George Silverman), an official of Ukrainian Jewish origins in his early forties at the Farm Security Administration, later assigned to the Board of Economic Warfare. Emotionally incapable of accepting the brutal reality of Stalinist Russia, Silvermaster retained the untarnished idealism of the revolutionary dream. A chronic sufferer from bronchial asthma, which often left him gasping for breath, he believed: "My time is strictly limited, and when I die I want to feel that at least I have had some part in building a decent life for those who come after me." It was Silvermaster who coaxed Harry Dexter White back into supplying intelligence, probably soon after the outbreak of war. By Pearl Harbor he had gathered together a group of ten government officials working both for various parts of Roosevelt's wartime administration and for the NKVD. White did not join the group but provided intelligence individually to Silvermaster, who found him a timid man reluctant for "his right hand to know what the left is doing." To calm his nerves and allow him to reassure his wife that he had abandoned active espionage, Silvermaster told him his information was going only to one man on the Central Committee of the American Communist Party. Silvermaster had no doubt that White knew the truth but believed that he preferred not to think about it. He