



Written by [William F. Jasper](#) on January 13, 2003

The Man Who “Started” the Cold War

The young Red Army lieutenant’s heart was pounding furiously and his mind was racing. He had just taken the most momentous step of his life, and he knew he was making a dangerous gamble. He had not realized, however, just how dangerous, nor could he have anticipated that he would run into such resistance from those he was trying to help. He wanted to defect and expose a dangerous espionage network of which he was a key component. He was carrying top-secret documents that would turn into his death warrant once his colleagues discovered them missing. And it was only a matter of time before that discovery would occur. Possibly minutes, hopefully hours.



It was the evening of September 5, 1945. At 8:00 p.m. Lieutenant Igor Gouzenko left the Soviet embassy in Ottawa, Canada, with 109 carefully selected documents stuffed inside his jacket. The documents proved that vast Soviet spy rings existed in Canada and the United States. Lieutenant Gouzenko was a cipher clerk for the GRU, Soviet military intelligence. It was his job to encode and decode messages for his boss, GRU Colonel Nickolai Zabotin, who supervised the spy rings in Canada. Now Gouzenko was trying to reveal these dark and deadly secrets to the world, but it seemed the world was not interested.

Upon leaving the embassy, Lt. Gouzenko had walked to the *Ottawa Journal*, a major daily newspaper. He spoke to reporters and to night editor Chester Frowde and showed his pack of documents. He wanted to tell his story, both as a way to warn the Canadian people and to gain protection for himself. But Mr. Frowde turned him away and told him to go to the police. “The first words he spoke were: ‘It’s war. It’s Russia,’” Frowde later recalled. “Well, that didn’t ring a bell with me because World War II was over and we were not at war with Russia,” said Frowde. But we were at war with Russia; we just didn’t know it. That is what Gouzenko was desperately trying to tell the West.

Defection Rejection

But the *Ottawa Journal* had turned him away. He had not anticipated this rejection. Now what? He went to the Justice Department. It was closed for the night. The feeling of dread mounted. It was not only his own life at stake here; the lives of his wife, Svetlana, and two-year-old son, Andrei, would also be in jeopardy if his defection were unsuccessful. He returned to his apartment for a fretful, sleepless night. Early the next morning, he left the apartment with his wife and child. He returned to the *Journal*, only to be sent away again. The desperate family wandered the streets of Ottawa, calling at other newspapers and government offices, seeking help and refuge, to no avail.

By noon the news had gotten around in government circles that a Russian embassy employee was trying to defect, and Canada’s prime minister, Mackenzie King, had been informed. But Mr. King saw a dilemma: He did not want to spoil good relations with the Soviet Union. After all, the war with Germany



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and Japan had just ended the previous month, and Stalin had been our “noble ally” throughout that ordeal. Actually, the war had begun with Stalin and Hider as allies in the invasion and occupation of Poland. And the Soviet Union had not declared war on Japan until after we had dropped the atom bombs and Japan was defeated. Still, Canada, like the rest of the Allies, followed the U.S. administration’s lead in turning a blind eye to the obvious hostilities and totalitarian designs of Communist dictator Joseph Stalin. Prime Minister King later wrote that the Gouzenko defection was “like a bomb on top of everything else, and one could not say how serious it might be or where it might lead.”

The Hon. Louis St. Laurent, Canada’s minister of justice, likewise, cited political exigencies for refusing to help Gouzenko. “I could not receive an official from a friendly embassy bearing tales of the kind he had described to my secretary,” he said. “It was only after he was brought in contact with the police in the ordinary course of police work that they were permitted to listen to his story and take notes from him.”

Deadly Pursuit

While officials and journalists temporized and shuffled, Gouzenko knew his situation was growing more perilous by the minute. Col. Zabotin and the GRU staff from the embassy would soon be scouring the city for him, if they were not already on his heels. Beyond this, and even more to be dreaded, were “the Neighbors.” The Neighbors was code for the NKVD, the infamous Soviet secret police and spy agency that later became known by the acronym KGB.

Having tried all avenues and meeting failure at every turn, the frantic refugees returned to their apartment, uncertain of their next move. No sooner had they arrived than Gouzenko noticed two men standing across the street observing them. Others would be coming soon, and they would not merely observe! Within minutes, someone knocked on his door and called his name. The voice belonged to Under-Lieutenant Lavrentiev of the embassy. The Gouzenkos froze and did not answer. Their little son, however, ran across the floor, making sufficient noise to let Lavrentiev know that they were still inside.

Gouzenko went out the back door. His neighbor in the adjoining apartment, Sgt. Main of the Royal Canadian Air Force, was on his balcony. Gouzenko quickly explained his desperate situation. He said that the Russians outside his door would kill him and his family. As the two men stood on the balcony, they saw a Russian coming up the back lane. Sgt. Main and his wife agreed to help the Gouzenkos and to take care of their little boy if anything should happen to them. At that point another neighbor came to the rescue. She agreed to hide the Gouzenko family in her apartment while Sgt. Main set off on his bicycle for police assistance.

In short order, two police officers, Walsh and McCulloch, arrived at the neighbor’s apartment and interviewed Gouzenko. They then took up surveillance in their squad car across the street and arranged with Sgt. Main to signal them with his bathroom light at the first sign of trouble. Around midnight four men arrived at the Gouzenko apartment and broke in through the main door. Sgt. Main signaled and the two police officers came immediately. They found the four interlopers ransacking the apartment. One of the men turned out to be Vitali Pavlov, second secretary and consul of the Russian Embassy, and head of the NKVD in Canada. Another one, in uniform, was Lieutenant-Colonel Rogov, military attache with the Russian Air Force.

Constable Walsh demanded to know what they were doing in the apartment. Pavlov responded that they were looking for papers that belonged to the Russian embassy, that the owner of the apartment was out



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of town and had given them permission to get what they wanted. "This does not look as if it has been done with a key," Walsh said, pointing to the broken door jamb. "You must have used a bit of pressure to get in and from the marks on the door you did not put them there with your fingers." At that point the Russian intruders became belligerent. Pavlov arrogantly claimed that the apartment was Russian property and ordered the constables out. But the policemen refused to be intimidated and waited for their inspector to arrive.

The police inspector ultimately arrived and sized up the situation. He asked the Russians to remain at the apartment with the two police officers while he went to make further inquiries. But while he was gone the Russians left. Constables Walsh and McCulloch did not try to stop them, but they remained throughout the night with the Gouzenkos and their Good Samaritan neighbors.

The Cold War Begins

The following day, September 7, the policemen took the Gouzenkos to the office of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, R.C.M.P., where Gouzenko turned over his documents and told his story. As intelligence personnel reviewed his documents and investigated his leads, the enormity of his message began to sink in. Mr. Gouzenko is frequently referred to as "the man who started the Cold War." That is a misleading representation; Gouzenko did not start any war; he merely alerted one side that its supposed ally was, in truth, waging a secret war against it.

The perfidy and the sheer scale of the secret Soviet war effort were staggering. The documents Gouzenko brought with him showed that the GRU and NKVD had recruited hundreds of assets to penetrate all of the most sensitive posts and institutions in Canada, America, and Britain. Even more alarming, Western intelligence would soon learn that the spy network Gouzenko exposed was only part of a much larger network. There were parallel networks in Canada — run by both the NKVD and GRU — of which Gouzenko's superior, Col. Zabotin, was unaware.

In an article he wrote for *Coronet* magazine in March 1953 entitled "Stalin Sent Me to Spy School," Gouzenko reflected on this Soviet saturation approach to espionage. While at the GRU's Moscow spy academy, he said, he asked his station chief "how it was that American and English authorities were unable to uncover our agents when there were so many of them." The chief's reply was (and is still) chilling. Gouzenko wrote:

He smiled wanly. "Our strength is in those very numbers," he answered. "The authorities nip one and think they have 'cleared up the situation' — but nine stay free to continue our work. Moreover, some of our most valued agents are in such high places that they could scarcely be suspected of treason."

When the Gouzenko story was made public several months later, it hit the Western world like an earthquake. And tremors continued for years after as arrests, trials, investigations, and controversies multiplied. In October 1945, a Royal Commission was established to investigate the Gouzenko documents and allegations, co-chaired by Canadian Supreme Court Justices Robert Taschereau and R. L. Kellock. On February 15, 1946, the government arrested 13 suspects. On March 14, another 26 Canadians were arrested on espionage charges. Among them was Fred Rose, a Member of Parliament, and Sam Carr, organizing secretary of the Communist Party of Canada. In June 1946, the Royal Commission released its massive 725-page report on the Gouzenko revelations.

The commission report noted that the network Gouzenko revealed was not of recent vintage; it had been under construction for decades. The report stated:



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When Gouzenko came to Canada in June 1943, he arrived with Colonel Zabotin, who had the official title of "Military Attache."... Zabotin did not come here to inaugurate a system of espionage, but to continue and amplify the work of his predecessors.

As early as 1924, there was an organization at work in Canada directed from Russia and operating with sympathizers in Canada. Two of the most active persons in this organization were Fred Rose, born Rosenberg, in Lublin, Poland, and Sam Can, born Kogen or Cohen in Tomachpol, Russian Ukraine.

The Royal Commission noted that Carr had been trained in Russia at the Lenin Institute, where students "received a very good education as 'agents conspirators.'" They were trained, said the report, in fomenting and prolonging labor union strikes, espionage, sabotage, and barricade fighting.

The Atom Bomb Spies

Most explosive of all Gouzenko's revelations concerned the primary target of Soviet espionage at that time: the atom bomb. A monumental collaborative war effort by scientists from Britain, Canada, and the United States had surmounted daunting theoretical and practical obstacles to create the terrible new weapon. The Soviets were many years behind in research on their own atomic weapons and could not hope to catch up except through espionage, through massive transfers not only of information — research notes, plans, diagrams, formulas, etc. — but of actual instruments and refined uranium.

A key Soviet operative in all this was a British scientist with the cover name "Alek." Gouzenko's documents revealed this agent's identity. He was Dr. Alan Nunn May, a senior member of the British research team, working at Canada's atomic energy laboratory in Montreal. However, he also had access to the top secret U.S. A-bomb facilities at Los Alamos, Oak Ridge, Hanford, and Chicago. Having secretly joined the Communist Party years before in England, Dr. May was contacted in Canada by Col. Zabotin's GRU agents and given a very demanding assignment. He was told by his Communist masters that he must provide them with "everything you can tell us about the atomic bomb project in the United States and Canada. We want it in a hurry." Dr. "Alek" May did not fail them. As Ralph de Toledano notes in *The Greatest Plot in History*, May not only provided the Soviets with invaluable scientific information from the super-secret project, but "he also presented Stalin with a sample of enriched U-235. This was his most valuable contribution."

Mr. de Toledano, who interviewed the secretive Gouzenko on more than one occasion and is one of the foremost experts on the atom bomb spies, wrote of May's treason:

An analysis by Soviet scientists opened to them that precious secret — the precise ingredients we were using in the bomb, extracted from nature at the cost of an untold number of scientific hours and hundreds of millions of dollars. This one gift was worth all the time, energy, money, and duplicated effort of the Soviet Intelligence service. The U-235 sample and a long scientific memorandum from May were considered so important that an NKVD colonel flew them to Moscow.

However, Dr. May was not the only mole within the secret weapons project. The Gouzenko investigation started the ball rolling that led to Bruno Pontecorvo and Klaus Fuchs, fellow Communist physicists within the Manhattan Project who also provided invaluable aid to the Soviet Union. It led also to exposing Harry Gold, David Greenglass, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, and other Soviet agents. And although the Gouzenko documents did not provide his name, they also pointed to a high mole in the U.S. State Department: Alger Hiss. Unbeknownst to Gouzenko, another Communist defector, Elizabeth Bentley, had, just a few months before, fingered Hiss by name to the FBI. But Hiss would be protected for several more years by top members of the Establishment, including U.S. Secretary of State John



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Foster Dulles.

Other members of the Atom bomb spy network were also protected — for decades. In 1995, release of some of the secret National Security Agency documents known as the “Venona” cables revealed that one of the top Soviet agents to penetrate the Manhattan Project was Harvard physicist Theodore Hall (codename “Youngster”). After the war, Dr. Hall had gone on to a distinguished career and, in 1995, was teaching and researching at Cambridge University in England. Yet he had never been prosecuted or publicly “outed” as a traitor. There are many additional Soviet agents mentioned in the Venona documents who were never identified. When Mr. de Toledano interviewed Gouzenko in 1953, the defector told him that he had “positive knowledge” of eight uncovered espionage groups in America, including high-level moles. He was distressed that the U.S. and British governments had both failed to clean out the dangerous spy nests. It chillingly confirmed to him the claims by his former spy chief that Moscow had agents “in such high places” that they could run effective damage control and limit investigations to protect their own.

Igor Gouzenko died in 1982. In September 2002, the Canadian government belatedly recognized his contributions to his adopted country. Mrs. Gouzenko was presented with a plaque and a pension. She still lives under a pseudonym, as do the couple’s eight children.

A far more fitting tribute to Mr. Gouzenko, and to all the many other defectors who risked their lives to warn the West, would be to finally open the files and inaugurate the kind of thorough investigations Gouzenko advocated. The enemy networks left in place, we have every reason to believe, continued to function, recruit, and replicate. These networks and their progeny are almost certainly behind many of the subsequent fiascos our nation has suffered, including the continuing losses of critical weapons technology. Some of these losses may turn out to be as important as the atom bomb itself.

Photo: Igor Gouzenko, wearing white hood for anonymity



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