



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 a half 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 World War II, 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 anticommunist 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.

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