

Earley, Pete. Confessions of a Spy: The Real Story of Aldrich Ames. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1997.

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Volume 17, Number 2, Fall 1997

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs17_02br05

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

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Cite this review

Hulnick, A. S. (1997). Review of [Earley, Pete. Confessions of a Spy: The Real Story of Aldrich Ames. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1997.] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 17(2), 185–187.

Earley, Pete. *Confessions of a Spy: The Real Story of Aldrich Ames.* New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1997.

In February 1994, Aldrich Ames, Russia's "mole" inside the US Central Intelligence Agency, was trapped by the FBI and arrested on charges of espionage. In the following months, the US government allowed Ames to negotiate a plea bargain that required him to reveal the details of his spying in exchange for a reduced sentence for his wife Rosario, who had also been charged with espionage.

Although the then-Director of Central Intelligence, R. James Woolsey, characterized Ames as a "serial killer," because he had revealed the identities of a number of Russian agents working for the CIA and FBI and Moscow had ordered them executed, Ames did not face the death penalty but rather life in prison without parole. Later in the year, Washington released several reports on the Ames case, and by early 1995, the first of four books on the case began to appear in print. They ranged in accuracy from British author James Adams' *Sellout*, which was essentially a retelling of the material contained in the government's released documents, to Peter Maas' sensationalist and undocumented *Killer Spy*. David Wise, a well-known author on intelligence matters, and Tim Weiner, the New York Times intelligence writer, added their own works to the list.

Ironically, two years later, just after the second Russian spy within the CIA, Harold Nicholson, was arrested by the FBI, Pete Earley's book on the Ames case and the fifth on the subject, appeared. Earley's *Confessions of a Spy* is worth the wait. Earley based his book on interviews he managed to have with Ames in prison, and a lengthy correspondence with the jailed spy in the months that followed, as well as on interviews with Russians involved in the case including Oleg Gordievsky, the well-known defector who almost became one of Ames' victims and even with the CIA team that helped make the case against their former colleague. All of this material is new and welcome indeed.

Earley shows us, based in part on Ames' own revelations, that the CIA turncoat was not the drunken bumbler depicted in the earlier books, but rather a capable espionage agent who eventually became complacent and careless. Earley also provides insights into the CIA's handling of the case that shows how a dedicated team of fairly junior officers was able finally to steer the investigation of the lost agent cases onto the right track to nab the "mole."

Pete Earley is no stranger to the world of espionage. His 1988 book *Family of Spies: Inside the John Walker Spy Ring* documented what was, until the Ames case, the most damaging Soviet penetration of US intelligence, and his previous experience as a reporter for the Washington Post made him wise to the ways of Washington.

In his examination of the Ames case, Earley reveals that he was able to get inside the Alexandria, Virginia detention center where Ames was being held in the months after his arrest and conduct eleven one-on-one interviews without interference or apparently even the knowledge of the FBI or CIA. This seems to be yet another in the series of mistakes the US government made in handling the Ames affair. Earley may have been helped in

his little deception by his knowledge of the US prison system gained in preparation of an earlier book on Leavenworth Prison in Kansas.

Did Ames lie to Earley about his career as a Russian agent? Earley thinks that, for the most part, Ames told the truth about his exploits since Ames had no reason to lie. He had already been sentenced to life in prison without parole, he was forbidden from making any money in telling his story, and his wife Rosario had benefitted from the plea bargain in obtaining a reduced sentence for her part in the espionage. Ames had nothing to lose in giving details to Earley, although Ames made it clear that he still somehow hoped to get his hands on the money he thought the Russians were holding for him as an eventual pay-off.

Confessions of a Spy is a welcome addition to the intelligence literature as well as a good read. It provides details on how intelligence systems especially in espionage and counter-espionage really work and how intelligence officers think about such operations. While some of the details remain shrouded in secrecy on both the Russian and American sides of the case and many of those involved who agreed or were permitted to be interviewed were circumspect indeed about the roles they played, there is much to learn here. We find out that Ames was a lot more devious and clever than the earlier books on his case led us to believe, that the Russians tried hard to counter the mistakes they made in handling Ames, and that the CIA worked diligently to track down the spy in their midst after their initial uncertainty about the loss of their Russian agents.

We have not heard the last of the Ames case, despite Pete Earley's best efforts. Peter Maas' book *Killer Spy* is reportedly to become a movie, and Ames himself may yet make some effort to tell his story in his own way, even if he can't make any money by doing so. But, until then, Pete Earley's coverage of the Ames case will remain our best insight into the thinking of a spy.

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