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## ***The True Story of Izzy***

By [Jonathan Mirsky](#)

**American Radical: The Life and Times of I.F. Stone**

by **D.D. Guttenplan**

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 570 pp., \$35.00

In the dark McCarthy years I.F. Stone said, "Well, I may be just a Red Jew son-of-a-bitch to them, but I'm keeping Thomas Jefferson alive." Stone remains one of the most famous, effective, and witty American muckrakers, a label he considered both a compliment and a restraint. He obtained scoops any one of which would secure the reputation of an ordinary reporter for life. In his early days as a reporter in New York he revealed that the police regarded Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia as a Red. The police commissioner soon resigned. Decades later, when he became a nationally admired and feared adversary of the Washington establishment, he proved, for example, that the government was lying when it claimed underground nuclear tests could not be sensed from far away. Later, he established that the alleged attacks on American warships in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964, which allowed Lyndon Johnson to bomb North Vietnam, were either insignificant or nonexistent, and in any event seemed to be a response to American provocation.

There are now three biographies of Stone, who for much of his life worked either alone or as if he were alone, and this enormous latest one is a magnificent achievement, comprehensive, well written, and while admiring also scrupulously fair. (To "declare an interest," the Stones were close friends of my family and for several years during the anti-Vietnam War movement I spoke on platforms with Izzy.)

D.D. Guttenplan, London correspondent for *The Nation*, makes no bones about the moments in Stone's life when he ducked or kept silent on issues that collided with his deeply held beliefs. He kept silent on loyalist outrages in Spain and on the Israeli massacre of Arabs at Deir Yassin, although he conceded later this was shameful. He was silent on the shameful internment during World War II of 110,000 American citizens of Japanese descent. Easily charmed, he said good things about Cuba, failing to criticize the repression under Castro's dictatorship. (Part of the attraction was Che Guevara, "the first man I had ever met whom I thought not just handsome but beautiful.") He fell for John F. Kennedy too, but only briefly. Stone had been hopeful about the Soviet Union, but as with Cuba and Kennedy he changed his mind and admitted he had been mistaken. "I have no inhibitions about changing my mind," he said. Always a radical, he was critical of liberals, who he often found were trimmers, weaklings, and liars, although he never hesitated to praise them when he thought they had done the right thing. Throughout his life, his view was, in one of Guttenplan's deft phrases, "Never turn your back on a liberal in a tight corner."

I learned a great deal from Guttenplan's book, not least about some aspects of Stone's character that I only partially understood. Like many radicals he could be fearless when some group, even a small one, or principle came under attack. But in personal matters he could be insensitive or opaque. He hated exploitation but expected his wife to bear almost all responsibilities for the family. When his poet daughter Celia told him she had eloped—with a man who would eventually win a Nobel Prize—Stone said, "Look, okay, you're married, you're not married, get the car down here. I have to get the *Weekly s*"—his own newspaper—"to the stands." When one of his assistants, a married woman with a husband in the military, called to say her car wouldn't start, Stone "told her not to bother coming in again." Stone fired another young colleague who declined to make hotel reservations for him.

"My father capitalized anger," Stone's son Christopher told Guttenplan. "He drew it down. It was an animating resource." Indeed, and his anger, his competitive need to know more than others, his conviction that governments were run by liars, together with his need to be a star, to be accepted, came from his earliest days. Born in 1907, he was bookish, awkward, and unpopular in school where he directed his humor at "authority figures." Looking back on his childhood he remarked, "I was lonesome. I was a kind of freak." He hid behind his reading, which was advanced far beyond his years for a small Jewish boy in the anti-Semitic Wasp town of Haddonfield, New Jersey, where his father, one of a few Jews living there, ran a dry goods store. He loved Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and William Blake, and would later tell Celia that being a great poet was "the greatest thing in the world." Little Isadore Feinstein, as he then was, feared anti-Semitism all his life, changed his name more than once to protect his children, he insisted, and considered moving to Israel.

He misunderstood Jack London's *Martin Eden*, terming it "my introduction to radicalism," when in fact the central character is a fascist. He was his mother's favorite but didn't get on with his father—hence, perhaps, his need for love and his rage. He never revealed that his mother, desperate during the Depression, almost died when she swallowed Lysol:

I.F. Stone never mentioned his mother's illness to any of the dozens of interviewers who came to profile him over the years...the tight and persistent silence from a man who otherwise delighted in public attention.

The last great project of his life was to learn Greek, in order to discover why the world's first democracy executed Socrates for speaking his mind. He found Socrates, as Guttenplan puts it,

a brilliant writer, inspiring teacher, and master propagandist whose deep hostility to Athenian democracy, taken up by his student disciples Alcibiades and Critias, [leads] to a succession of bloody dictatorships that render the city defenseless before its Spartan enemies.

Stone died on June 18, 1989, age eighty-one. For his funeral, Isaiah Berlin sent this message: "He was always in hot water and his hands were always clean." By his bed lay an anthology of Greek verse bookmarked at the Stoic poet Cleanthes' hymn to Zeus: "Master of the bright thunderbolt, save men from painful ignorance."

"Before he was anything else he was a newspaperman," says Guttenplan, and this is the great theme of Izzy's life, underpinned perhaps by what he saw of himself in *Martin Eden*: "I look to the state for nothing. I look only to the strong man, the man on horseback, to save the state from its own rotten futility," although all his life he would attack other men on horseback. He published his own newspaper in 1922, when he was fourteen. On its front page it condemned the Hearst newspapers, a lifelong enemy, but inside there was a speech from *Antigone* by "Saphocles." Already at thirteen, from his reading of Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Upton Sinclair, he developed "a taste for books that exposed the conflicts and conventions of everyday life."

An indifferent student in school, forty-ninth in a class of fifty-four, he managed to enter the University of Pennsylvania where he also paid little attention to succeeding academically, although he was marked "distinguished" in English. He was troubled by anti-Semitic refusals to admit him into a Wasp-dominated campus literary society, but was remembered by a rich New Yorker as "the fullest alive person I'd met up to then.... He talked of the great things he'd been reading, Hardy's poetry as well as Jeffers', Livy, Horace—he loved Horace. And Gibbon's history...." The new friend recalled, too, that Izzy "was a confirmed socialist who had read Hegel and Marx; naturally he despised Hoover and was hopeful about the Soviet Union." At the same time: "What impressed me most was his great spirit and vast reading; he had an independent and stubborn point of view about things."

Very likely Izzy was a mediocre university student because he was already working for local newspapers, early displaying his lifelong ability to get to the bottom of things. He was sent to cover a basketball game, about which, awkward physically, he knew nothing. He remembered:

I got there in the middle...at the half.... I began by asking, "What's the object of the game? Show me what they do. What are the goals? Was there anything dramatic?" ...I wrote a very good story—very colorful.

This showed the nose of a police reporter, which Izzy would say later was the secret of Woodward and Bernstein, who were working as police-beat reporters on *The Washington Post* when they uncovered the Watergate scandal. He became well known for his articles in *The Nation* and *PM* and the *Daily Compass*. For some years he was a television star on *Meet the Press* and had easy access to men like Felix Frankfurter, Roosevelt's fixer Thomas "Tommy the Cork" Corcoran, and the union leader Walter Reuther. In one of his big scoops, Izzy exposed Standard Oil's cartel agreement with the German firm I.G. Farben, for which he was praised by Senator Harry Truman.

And then, during the early cold war years, as Guttenplan writes, when he was suspected of being at least disloyal if not a Communist Party member, "slowly, he vanishes." During one three-year period when he had next to no work, he sat in an office to which no one came but the postman (who showed Izzy's mail to the FBI) and maintenance workers.

Izzy's changing views of the Soviet Union would always bedevil his reputation and fuel the accusations that he was a Soviet agent. Writing under one of his (short-lived) pseudonyms, Abelard Stone, he wrote in 1933, "The road to a Soviet America, the one way out that could make a real difference to the working classes, was closed." Izzy never joined the Party, but he was certainly known to be a "friend" for some years, and his brothers and sister were Party members. Probably the best explanation for not joining came from Izzy himself: "The idea of becoming subject to party discipline and told what to do, or what to think, or what to write was absolutely repugnant to me." Guttenplan terms Izzy a "one-man united front" who despised the endemic infighting on the left and later in the antiwar and civil rights movements. "I tried to befriend everyone. I had socialists, communists, Trotskyists, Lovestoneites and liberals for friends. My door was open."

But it took him years to finally say, in 1956, that the Soviet Union was "not a good society and it is not led by honest men." He was troubled, but not appalled, by the Moscow treason trials of 1937 and tried to "make sense" of them, or as Guttenplan says, "managed to remain agnostic." He even invoked that most degrading of apologies: "Revolutions do not take place according to Emily Post. The birth of a new social order, like the birth of a human being, is a painful process." (One is reminded of Mao justifying the murder of landlords by peasants: "A revolution is not a dinner party.")

This view would lead to Izzy's inability to condemn loyalist atrocities during the Spanish civil war. Guttenplan always sees Izzy in the round: he may have been a Stalinist at one point, he says, "at the very least, a small c communist. But in the years since, he'd been no more than an enthusiastic fellow traveler." More bluntly still, Guttenplan observes that like most fellow travelers Izzy had

been willing to trade a certain ideological forbearance for the stamina and organizational know-how [American] Communist Party comrades brought to the battles for industrial democracy and racial equality.

We have seen this tendency to explain and excuse during revolutions in Vietnam and China.

What troubled Izzy, other fellow travelers, and many Party members the most was the 1939 Nazi–Soviet pact. He singled out Stalin, "the Moscow Machiavelli who suddenly found peace as divisible as the Polish plains and marshes." But only a few months earlier, Izzy had signed a manifesto saying among other things that it was "clear that Soviet and fascist policies are diametrically opposed.... We should like to stress ten

basic points in which Soviet socialism differs from totalitarian fascism." After the pact, Guttenplan writes, the closest Izzy came to an admission that he had been wrongheaded was this:

The future of Russo-German relations is a no man's land into which the prophet ventures at his own risk. More than one seer has been blown to bits, and most of us are already shell-shocked.

But Izzy's name did not appear on this unsigned *Nation* editorial.

Izzy's zigzag route through the swamps of communism and the Soviet Union cost him a great deal besides damage to his reputation. He was treated by the Washington establishment as a pariah or, as Izzy put it, "a former person"—a term first used in revolutionary Russia about the regime's enemies—all the more so after he published *The Hidden History of the Korean War* in 1952. It is, as Guttenplan well says, "a history wrapped in an enigma." Two myths about the book can be dismissed. Izzy did not say the South invaded the North; nor did he say the US used germ warfare. Guttenplan carefully writes:

Izzy, though never quite claiming that South Korea started the war, did suggest that [President Syngman] Rhee provoked the North Korean invasion and that both he and [General Douglas] MacArthur certainly welcomed it. "Was the war Stalin's blunder? Or was it MacArthur's plan?" Izzy wondered somewhat disingenuously.

Guttenplan sums this up: "History shows that Izzy was probably wrong about how the war started."

With the early 1950s, the Korea book, and increased FBI surveillance came years of suspicion about Izzy's ultimate loyalty, suspicions that, as Guttenplan shows, even some of the FBI's sleuths did not share. Nonetheless, it is probably true, as Guttenplan writes, that "if he'd been born in Pinsk instead of Philadelphia, Izzy would have been denaturalized and deported."

Then ex-Soviet spies and officials entered the debate. It has all centered, even this year, on whether or not Izzy was the alleged agent—"alleged" is the important word here—the Soviets called Blin (Pancake). So far as we know, the allegation that Izzy was an agent was never made explicitly by any Russian official who met him. The original charge was leveled by Oleg Kalugin, a retired KGB general who spoke often of an unnamed agent, "a well-known American journalist" with whom he had lunch. Kalugin eventually conceded that the charge against Izzy was "just a malicious misinterpretation."

Guttenplan states that the FBI never found "a single piece of evidence to suggest that I.F. Stone was anything other than he seemed—an unrepentant radical who concentrated his fire on his own government's failings." Izzy himself once said, "Like [the stripper] Gypsy Rose Lee, I was taking it off every week. There was nothing left to expose." But now, in *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America*,<sup>[\*]</sup> we find this summary:

It is clear that Stone consciously cooperated with Soviet intelligence from 1936 through 1938—that is to say, he was a Soviet spy—but it is unclear if he reestablished that relationship in 1944–45.

This opinion, and much else in *Spies*, has already been contested. D.D. Guttenplan's own long and to me convincing criticism of *Spies* appeared in *The Nation* of May 6, 2009. It underlines how shaky and thin is the source material on Izzy, who, Guttenplan agrees, may well have exchanged views and information with a Soviet official when he was a fellow traveler.

Izzy, of course, had no official secrets to divulge. Would it matter if he had been a spy, Guttenplan asks? "My own view is that it would matter very much indeed." As he points out, Izzy was not objective; he wore

his values, facts, and opinions on his sleeve. But his views, Guttenplan insists, even when mistaken or distorted, were his own:

A journalist who accepts a hidden subsidy from a foreign power betrays not his country but his readers (as does a reporter who accepts a secret subsidy from his own government). He also betrays himself.

By 1972, in a series of articles in these pages, Izzy was mounting a bitter attack on the Soviet Union for its use of bogus psychiatry to confine and torture Russian dissidents and nonconformists.

After his long period of being "a former person," years described in his book *The Haunted Fifties*, Izzy slowly and then quickly came back to public approval and eventual near adulation. In part this was the result of his *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, a four-page paper chock-full of exposés and vituperation. His only full-time help came from his wife Esther and some young people whom he paid badly, and who went on, in some cases, to be well-known journalists.

Two prominent issues were Israel and Vietnam. He made many visits to Israel, of which he was proud as a Jew, but also acutely critical. What brought him fame was his voyage there in 1946 on a vessel carrying refugees that attempted to run the British blockade. In Jerusalem, Izzy said, he found not "a single Arab who favored a Jewish state" or "a single Jew who claimed to know" an Arab who favored a Jewish state. He was especially critical of American Jews who wanted a Jewish state: "I wish to say...that political agreement will be impossible so long as a single Jewish state in Palestine is demanded." He observed:

I am a Jew. I fell in love with Palestine. I want desperately to help the homeless of Central and Eastern Europe to find a home there.... I do not blame them for refusing to accept minority status in an Arab state.... But equally I do not blame the Arabs of Palestine for fighting against minority status in a Jewish state.

"He now believed," Guttenplan writes, "that the Jewish campaign in America on behalf of Israel was based on half-truths."

His own home near Washington would become "a way station on the Jewish underground railroad." His son Christopher recalled, "People would come by who Dad knew. Bomb makers. Irgun guys.... I remember a guy at dinner telling a story about blowing up a British garage." Izzy increasingly cast his lot with the Jews, who he portrayed as "the Jewish David contending with an Arab Goliath." His view was that the only solution was a "binational state," although he had no idea how it could be achieved. Eventually he would write:

For me the Arab-Jewish struggle is a tragedy. The essence of tragedy is the struggle of right against right.... When evil men do evil, their deeds belong to the realm of pathology. But when good men do evil, we confront the essence of human tragedy.

In my opinion Izzy's greatest contribution to American journalism was his early recognition of what was happening in Indochina and his steady uncovering of the lies of successive administrations. There were years of essays in *I.F. Stone's Weekly* and in this journal. In true Izzy style he formed his accurate impressions by close reading of documents that were available to anyone and by relying on his reading of history over many years. These qualities enabled him to write this about Indochina in March 1954:

If France backs out, we will step in, just as we stepped in to replace the British in Greece.... Those circles in the Pentagon which believe Indo-China the key to Southeast Asia will yet find a way to intervene.... A situation is building up in which inept men may be pushed by some unexpected turn of events into terrible decisions in sheer funk.

Izzy's analysis, which is what made him such a star in the antiwar years, together with his engaging, intimate way of speaking to small groups and huge crowds, was wholly accurate. This is given credibility by Guttenplan's own reliable commentary on the history and stages of the Indochinese conflict.

Already in 1963 Izzy wrote that the war was being lost. How could he know this, asks Guttenplan, especially since he had yet to go there? A year spent in France, he explains, reading French authorities on the region, together with Izzy's friendship with Bernard Fall, one of the leading experts on Indochina, is part of the answer. In this he was different from reporters like Neil Sheehan and David Halberstam who, perhaps regretfully, believed that the war must continue or America's position in the region would be undermined. (This reminds me of reporters in Iran and Afghanistan today who, perhaps with equal regret, see no end to the wars there.)

In Guttenplan's opinion, the key to Izzy's political reporting was his acute knowledge of how Washington works:

What Izzy knew was Washington. He knew how an administration could set limits not only on what was discussed but even on what counted as evidence. He knew the way domestic politics shaped and skewed debates on foreign policy, and he knew that the very subjects Truman and McCarthy made taboo—the relationship between nationalism and socialism, the legacy of colonialism and America's assumption of an imperial role in the world—were those most germane to understanding why we were in Vietnam.

It was all this that enabled him, uniquely, in 1964, to show that the "attacks" on US destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, which enabled Lyndon Johnson to persuade almost every senator and representative to give him full authority to pursue the war and bomb North Vietnam, either never happened or caused insignificant damage. He also showed that North Vietnamese actions on those dark nights in the gulf were in reprisal for secret US attacks, including bombardment of the North Vietnamese coast by PT bombs and CIA bombings of North Vietnamese bases in Laos. (As Guttenplan notes, retired Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara would admit precisely this many years later.)

In 1965, the *Weekly* also proved that very few weapons captured from the Vietcong came from the Communist bloc. To obtain these figures, Izzy wrote in the *Weekly*, "We called the Pentagon press office," which enabled him to demonstrate, in Guttenplan's words, "the embarrassing fact...that 95 percent of Viet Cong arms came from South Vietnam." In 1966 he spent several weeks in Vietnam, where he saw

the young Ivy Leaguers arriving briskly at the Embassy of a morning.... The team spirit is bursting out all over.... Under the supposed benevolence of our policy one soon detects a deep animosity to the Vietnamese and a vast arrogance. We assume the right to remold them, whether they choose to be remolded or not.

I must add that he makes a big mistake at this point by invoking John Paul Vann (by then no longer "Colonel" Vann) as an example of a man "who would approach the Vietnamese as people." As I found in Vietnam a year earlier, Vann was a killer, deeply involved in the early development of the Phoenix assassination program. Izzy, sometimes susceptible to charm—as with Che Guevara—obviously believed Vann's lies.

As D.D. Guttenplan makes plain in his superb and insightful biography, Izzy was learned, doggedly curious, angry, brave, and sometimes blind or wrong. His confidence was stupendous. He and I were to speak at an antiwar teach-in at a Washington hotel in 1965. Each speaker was allotted twelve minutes. Just before we and the pro-war speakers were to go on stage Izzy said to me, "Everyone knows what you're going to say. I have a lot of new material. I need your twelve minutes." I meekly gave them to him and he dismembered our adversaries in the debate. It didn't occur to him to thank me, and knowing him for so many years I didn't expect it.

In May 1989, in his ninth decade, Izzy was admitted to a hospital for surgery. It was May 21, the day after the Chinese authorities declared martial law to deal with protests in Tiananmen Square. A few days before his death, when he came to after his surgery, he asked his family, gathered at his bedside, "What's going on in China?"

### **Notes**

<sup>[\*]</sup>By John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Alexander Vassiliev (Yale University Press, 2009).