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Socialist Studies

A new biography spells out how an iconoclast became a journalistic icon

MICHAEL KAZIN

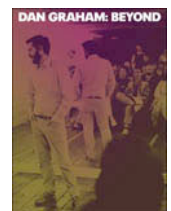
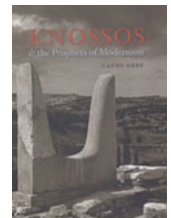
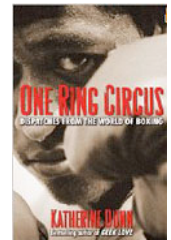


What was so great about I. F. Stone? For many journalists—most but not all of them on the left—“Izzy” remains the ultimate scribbler of truth to power. Like-minded bloggers claim him as a patron saint; last year, the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard began awarding an annual I. F. Stone Medal for Journalistic Independence. D. D. Guttenplan concludes his new biography, *American Radical*, “I. F. Stone wrote not to create a sensation, or to promote himself (or his ‘brand’), but to change the world.”

The future icon achieved his biggest scoop in 1964. Stone debunked the shaky tale the Johnson administration had told about a naval engagement in the Gulf of Tonkin, a fib that persuaded Congress to give the president almost boundless authority to escalate the war in Vietnam. By that time, the curly-haired little man with thick glasses had spent more than three decades digging into alleged outrages by governments and big businesses, all of which he lambasted with fine wit and a blizzard of detail in a variety of liberal and radical periodicals. Most notable of these outlets was his eponymous weekly, published from 1953 until 1971. Like a literary judo master, Stone flipped mighty politicians and bureaucrats onto the mat by wielding their own contradictory words against them. Not surprisingly, he thought “objective journalism” to be a foolish and impossible notion.

For years, Stone filed as many as six columns a week, taking a stand on any topic of the day that inspired or enraged him—and few did not fall into one category or the other. He sided with labor against capital in the 1930s, with antifascists against isolationists in the run-up to Pearl Harbor, with the Zionist underground against the British Empire during the birth pangs of Israel, and with the Cuban revolutionaries against the Yanquis who were trying to overthrow them in the early 1960s. Even his retirement project, a book about the trial of Socrates, was driven by a political argument. The great philosopher, Stone asserted, also happened to be an arrogant enemy of the people: “His identification of virtue with an unattainable knowledge stripped common men of hope and denied their capacity to govern themselves.”

Compared with recent Stone biographies by Myra MacPherson and Robert Cottrell, Guttenplan’s has uncovered no new, significant cache of documents, and nothing in it is likely to alter the received wisdom about a venerated figure on the left. What rescues *American Radical* from the shoals of conventionality is the care its author takes to describe and analyze every turn in Stone’s long, complex political life. Guttenplan, a London correspondent for *The Nation*, certainly admires his subject; if he did not, Izzy Stone’s widow and children would not have given him their full cooperation. But he tempers that esteem with the sensibility and knowledge of a fine historian. Unlike many biographers, Guttenplan understands “the times” as well as “the life.” And





historian. Unlike many biographers, Guttenplan understands the times as well as the life. And this enables him to demonstrate that Stone's volatile career did not always live up to his image as an eternal skeptic about the powers that were.

That was particularly true in regard to Communism. It is fitting that Stone died a few months before the joyful demolition of the Berlin Wall, because he had long wrestled with the great and terrible cause that essentially expired that same year. Stone never joined the American CP—although his brother and a close friend did. But for decades, he remained sympathetic to the comrades at home and to the men in the Kremlin whose lead they obediently followed. On several occasions, he did take a position sharply at odds with theirs—most tellingly, after Stalin signed the nonaggression pact with Hitler in August 1939. But Stone continued to give Communists the benefit of the doubt. During the cold war, he branded nearly every anti-Communist—whether Joe McCarthy or Arthur Schlesinger Jr.—an irrational Red-baiter.

Stone, like many intellectuals of his generation—his fellow Jews in particular—long believed that Communism, whatever its faults, was the best hope for a future free of ruthless competition, racial hatred, and war. Not until he visited the USSR in 1956 did he declare the whole enterprise to be bankrupt. He then confessed in his *Weekly*, "I feel like a swimmer underwater who must rise to the surface or his lungs will burst. . . . *This is not a good society and it is not led by honest men.* Of course, by that time, Soviet leaders were finally admitting that Stalin had been a tyrant, and rebels across Eastern Europe were organizing resistance to the regimes imposed on them by the Red Army.

Guttenplan is careful to note that Stone traveled the wide, relaxed orbit of the Popular Front rather than within the far smaller and more rigorous nucleus of journalists who hewed to the American CP. He reported and wrote opinion pieces for the *New Republic*, the *New York Post*, and *The Nation*—never for the *Daily Worker* or the *New Masses*—and was always passionate about exposing "people who push other people around," as the motto of one of his outlets, the New York City daily *PM*, put it. His journalistic reputation depended on mining key sources within the government as well as among radical activists. Guttenplan astutely traces Stone's long hot-and-cold relationship with Harold Ickes, the interior secretary who was a mainstay of the New Deal. In his diary, Ickes called the reporter "a clever little Jew . . . [who] seems to know pretty well what is going on here in Washington and is a fearless writer." There was little trust on either side, but in the age-old dance of politicians and the press, each man proved quite useful to the other.

The Popular Front helped make the United States a more tolerant, more democratic society—and put pressure on New Dealers like Ickes to dismantle barriers between people the government deemed worthy of its help and those it ignored. Knowing that the tyrants in the Kremlin smiled on its activities does not negate the fine work of writers like Stone and of such artists as Dorothea Lange, Paul Robeson, and Orson Welles. As Guttenplan makes clear, the movement mattered more to America than did the party that spawned it.

But several hundred Americans who joined the CP or were intimate with it took one big step beyond assisting unions, civil rights organizers, and the wars against fascism that began in Spain and soon spread beyond. Documents released since the fall of the USSR have conclusively proved that some American Communists were indeed spying for Moscow. There is no longer any reasonable doubt about the guilt of Julius Rosenberg and little about that of Alger Hiss, although historians continue to dispute the value of the information they disclosed.

But what about Stone? In the 1990s, various documents surfaced that appeared to name him, under the code name Pancake, as having had occasional contact with Soviet intelligence agents in the US during the late 1930s and World War II. This spring, a new book, *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America*, makes the same charge, backed up by notes that a former KGB officer, Alexander Vassiliev, took from the records of his old employer. The authors—John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Vassiliev himself—state that "Stone assisted Soviet intelligence on a number of tasks, ranging from doing some talent spotting, acting as a courier by relaying information to other agents, and providing private journalistic tidbits and data the KGB found interesting." They claim that Pancake named a Hearst reporter who disagreed with his publisher's views about Hitler and that he passed on the name of a diplomat's son in Berlin who wanted to enlist in the antifascist cause.

These accusations and the Russian documents on which they are based will undoubtedly touch off a new round in one of the longest-running debates in political history: whether Communists and their allies were genuine American radicals or Stalinist dupes and stooges. Still, one thing is not in doubt: Stone longed all his adult life for a socialist future—and yet came to believe that every government that professed to share that dream ended up betraying it. Perhaps the best



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way for Stone's many admirers to emulate him in our postsocialist world is to be as skeptical about those in power who seem to agree with you as about those whom you rightly detest.

Michael Kazin's most recent book is A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan (Knopf, 2006). He teaches history at Georgetown University.

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