

Romancing I. F. Stone

by *Ronald Radosh*

By the time he died in 1989, the once outcast and radical journalist I. F. Stone, fondly called “Izzy” by all who knew him, had become an icon. The blurbs on the back of Myra MacPherson’s new look at Stone’s life are from the likes of journalistic establishment dons like Craig Unger, Helen Thomas, Richard Reeves, and others—all of whom try to tell us that were he alive, Stone could wake up today’s “lapdog” reporters.¹ He would, as Thomas writes, “lead our country to its greatest ideals again.”

In an era when *The New York Times*, considered by Stone during his lifetime to be a right-wing paper, contains a constant barrage against conservatives and centrists from editorial columnists like Frank Rich, Paul Krugman, and Bob Herbert, along with official editorials that regularly condemn the Bush administration, one must pause to wonder why they think they still need Stone’s presence. If anything, an argument can be made that Stone’s writings were far more ambiguous and balanced at times than what comes each week in Frank Rich’s columns.

And yet Stone is continually brought forth for a new generation to learn of his supposed prescience and greatness, and to acquaint readers with what purportedly is missing from the story presented by today’s

reporters. Peter Osnos, now a publisher who started his career as one of Stone’s young assistants, has put together yet another collection of Stone’s writing that duplicates the many Stone anthologies that have already been published.² Myra MacPherson, a reporter now retired from the *Washington Post*, has written the first comprehensive biography, a book filled with fascinating stories from those who both revered and criticized Stone, based on hundreds of interviews that MacPherson began when she started working on the book in 1990.

Isidor Feinstein began his career when he was, as MacPherson calls him, a “news-paperman in knee pants.” He was fortunate to have been taken in by a wealthy mentor, J. David Stern, who hired him for a Camden, New Jersey, paper when he was still a high school junior. As Stern moved up the publishing ladder—buying the *Philadelphia Record* in the 1920s and the *New York Post* in 1933—he took Stone with him. At the youthful age of twenty-six, Stone found himself chief editorial writer and reporter for the powerful New York tabloid. It was during that period, in 1937, he changed his name to Stone—not to hide his Jewish identity, but out of hope that his anti-fascist

¹ *All Governments Lie: The Life and Times of Rebel Journalist I. F. Stone*, Myra MacPherson; Scribner, 564 pages, \$35.

² *The Best of I. F. Stone*, edited by Karl Weber, with an introduction by Peter Osnos; Public Affairs, 350 pages, \$23.95.

editorials would not be written off because readers would ask, “What do you expect from a Jew?”

Stone’s leftism and support of the wartime Popular Front—the name for the alliance of New Deal liberals with fellow-travelers and Communist Party members—led to his departure from the *Post* after editorial differences surfaced with the publisher, and to his years with the short-lived leftist New York daily *P.M.* and the even shorter lived *New York Daily Compass*. When that paper folded in 1953, Stone would start the venture that made him famous and eventually wealthy—a four-page newsletter he wrote and published himself, *I. F. Stone’s Weekly*, started with \$5000 contributed from relatives. By the time he closed it down because of ill health in 1971, he had 70,000 subscribers, a wide following, and a sub list that was bought by the *New York Review of Books*, in a deal that gave him a great deal of money and brought him on board as an editorial contributor.

It was in his newsletter that Stone’s careful reading and sifting of government documents, his excerpts from stories that received little attention in the regular press, and his pithy editorial voice made him the hero to a new generation of rebelling youth. During the years of the Vietnam War, Stone became the last word for college students who were aghast at the U.S. war in Southeast Asia, and they took Stone’s attacks on LBJ and later Nixon as definitive. Today’s journalists, many of them among that generation who discovered Stone in the 1960s, understandably eulogize him and have anointed him to a status of journalistic greatness.

But what can one say about Stone’s record, his supposed prescience, the nature of the insights he offered and the assumptions he held? Are Myra MacPherson, Peter Osnos, and a host of other reporters and acolytes correct to hold I. F. Stone in such esteem? The value of the collection of articles put together by Weber and Osnos is that it allows us to judge Stone on our own. Osnos

tells us that “Stone’s wisdom, informing his perceptions and framing his arguments, reads with spectacular currency.” It depends on which piece you read. Stone’s 1966 essay “What It’s Like to Be in Saigon” is a breezily written *tour de force* that could have been penned today, had Stone been alive to visit Baghdad and the Green Zone. But look at one of his essays written in the earliest days of the Cold War, in May 1945. The new United Nations, he feared, was meant to be “an organization of an anti-Soviet bloc.” And believing that postwar America would soon suffer the second great depression always predicted by the Marxists, Stone argued that America’s leaders were trying to avoid the crisis “by armed conflict,” fearing that “the contrast between full employment in the USSR and a new unemployment crisis after the war in the USA would be explosive.”

Readers will look in vain in the collection for any of Stone’s articles for the *Compass* on the Korean War, or any excerpt from his tendentious, conspiracy-mongering book, *The Hidden History of the Korean War* (1951), in which Stone argued that South Korea’s leader, Syngman Rhee, “deliberately provoked” an attack by the North, with “secret support from Chiang Kai-shek and some elements of the U.S. government.” The Korean War, to Stone, was an American aggression against an indigenous revolutionary government. General Douglas MacArthur, he implied, and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles knew two days earlier from arms buildup by the North at the 38th parallel that military conflict was certain, yet did nothing about it. It was a conspiracy theory much like today’s about the events of 9/11. To her credit, MacPherson deals with this candidly in her book, although she tries her best to make Stone look good, by emphasizing his decision to challenge U.S. policy in Southeast Asia—and not the nature of his challenge. She snidely reprints J. Edgar Hoover’s comment on Stone’s book: “Never, I think has the communist line been upheld with such an elaborate display of the mechanics of

research.” Shrewd readers might well respond that this is yet another case of “Just because J. Edgar Hoover said it doesn’t mean it wasn’t true!”

Stone’s greatest weakness—one that cannot be avoided by dealing with his reportage and commentary on the civil rights struggle—is his long-standing support and whitewashing of Stalin’s tyrannical regime in the Soviet Union. He believed Stalin was leading the worldwide anti-fascist struggle, and his commitment to the Popular Front was above all to be supported. While independent anti-Communists of the Left spoke out against the monstrous Purge Trials begun by Stalin in the mid 1930s, Stone held firm. He ignored firsthand reports from disillusioned Western reporters like Eugene Lyons, believing that they were unreliable, perhaps even fabrications meant to forestall the socialist future. In 1939, Sidney Hook and others ran an ad opposing Stalin’s regime, and created the Committee for Cultural Freedom, the first group to oppose Stalin from a leftist perspective.

Stone, along with the *Nation*, fretted about Hook’s (correct) comparison between Stalin and Hitler, and signed a letter to the magazine in August 1939 denouncing Hook and his committee, whom they said had maligned the Soviet Union. They saw the USSR as “a bulwark against war and aggression,” as well as a country in which “the expression of anti-Semitism” was a “criminal offense.” The Soviets, they went on, had introduced socialist planning, emancipated women, and developed an advanced system of child care. It was a nation that had achieved “one of the most far reaching cultural and educational advances in all history.” In that manner did Stone and his associates ignore all the evidence that was available to them about the regime’s true character. Much to Stone’s dismay, a week later came the announcement of the Nazi-Soviet Pact—which united Hitler and Stalin and made clear the accuracy of Sidney Hook’s judgment.

Even the reviewer in the October 23 issue of the *Nation*, the film critic John Powers, acknowledges that “Stone’s true failing was his tardiness in grasping the full monstrosity of actually existing Communism, especially Stalinism.” As he sarcastically points out, Stone’s “tiger eyes that could spot the threat to liberty in the footnotes of a Congressional report couldn’t clearly see the meaning of show trials, slave labor, and class-based mass murder.” Powers boldly writes for today’s “progressive” readers of the magazine, that Stone, “faced with one of the most tyrannical political regimes of his lifetime, got things so badly wrong that another man might have died questioning his own judgment.”

In some circles, however, pointing out such an obvious truth is seen as treading on dangerous ground. When the critic Paul Berman wrote a two-page negative review of the Stone books in the October 1 *New York Times Book Review*, Stone’s defenders raced to their keyboards. Berman had the effrontery to raise the issue of whether or not Stone had ever cooperated with KGB agents. Quoting MacPherson, he wrote that “something about [Stone’s] willingness ‘to perform tasks’ as part of his ‘longtime cooperation with Soviet intelligence’ is bound to make us wonder. What on earth was that about?”

MacPherson cites the claim of the former KGB agent Oleg Kalugin, that he often had lunch with Stone in the 1960s and picked up the tab. Kalugin regarded Stone as a friend who gave them information. MacPherson argues that Stone, like other journalists, innocently met with Russian sources, unaware at the time that they were KGB. Kalugin, however, had also written that Stone “began his cooperation with the Soviet intelligence long before me [sic], based entirely on his view of the world.” He gave no details, only to say that Stone was willing to “perform tasks” and give him views of government and Congressional leaders on various issues.

Fortunately, the Venona decrypts, the record of the exchanges between Moscow

Central and its agents in the U.S. during World War II and early in the Cold War, shed light on this matter. A declassified Venona decrypt of September 1944 establishes that the New York KGB *rezidentura* asked that they try to establish how close Stone still was to them. Using his code-name “Blin,” or “Pancake,” an October 1944 decrypt showed that the KGB (then NKVD) agent Vladimir Pravdin did meet with Stone. Stone, realizing that Pravdin was not a simple Russian journalist, told Pravdin that “he had noticed our attempts to contact him” but had “reacted negatively fearing the consequences.” Stone was not refusing his aid, he told him, but was worried about getting the attention of the FBI.

As Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes explain, the messages reveal that Stone was “flirting” with the KGB. This evidence does not prove that he was recruited by them at that time, although Kalugin’s claim in the 1990s that he had tried to reestablish contact with him in the 1960s suggests he might have met with and helped KGB agents in past years. In her book, MacPherson cites these authors to refute the allegations of the late Eric Breindel and Herbert Romerstein, who had argued to the contrary that “Stone, in the end, agreed to work for the NKVD and meet regularly with an officer.” Stone was “indeed . . . a Soviet agent.” It is their version that has caught on in far Right circles. Thus Ann Coulter, who incorrectly cites Klehr and Haynes as her source, writes that “it has now been overwhelmingly documented that I. F. Stone was a paid Soviet agent.”

These exaggerations about Stone, based on a highly aggressive reading of the Venona decrypts, proves only that he was approached, not that he signed up as an agent. MacPherson, however, uses this to discredit the entire reliance on Venona, which she argues are faulty since “there is no way to determine whether the Russian agents were telling the truth” or embellishing their exploits. Here she contradicts her earlier accurate assessment that Venona in fact shows

“how deeply the Russians succeeded in recruiting high level U.S. officials,” and that they corroborate the evidence against the Rosenbergs, Klaus Fuchs, and Alger Hiss. MacPherson also calls Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev’s *The Haunted Wood* “the most scholarly work” dealing with Venona, since they cross-referenced Venona with KGB documents viewed by Vassiliev in Russia. She says, with a distinct note of triumph, that Vassiliev and Weinstein “do not even mention Stone.” MacPherson must not have read their book very closely. In 1935, Moscow was most interested in getting information about publisher William Randolph Hearst, whom they suspected of having financial ties with the Nazis. Weinstein and Vassiliev write: “At least one such agent in the newspaper world, a *New York Post* reporter code-named ‘Blin,’ volunteered information about the publisher.”

The code-name “Blin” was precisely the same code-name used when the KGB tried in 1944 to reestablish contact. The authors do not say to whom they think the code-name refers. But Stone was a reporter and editorial writer at the time on the staff of the *Post*. It seems obvious that in both the 1935 and 1944 reports, “Blin” is one and the same—I. F. Stone. Their book, then, confirms the suspicion that Stone did work for them in the past. Paul Berman is correct. It appears that for a short time in the 1930s, Stone, for ideological reasons, agreed to help out the Soviet secret police, by investigating the views of people the Soviets were interested in, and by providing his findings to Soviet agents. Stone was not a spy. He passed no secrets; indeed, he had no access to any. But he helped agents by ferreting out material they desired. This amounts to more than innocent meetings with a supposed Soviet reporter.

For this in particular, Stone’s contemporary cheering section is livid. The left-wing journalist Joe Conason, writing on Salon.com, repeats the canard that “supposed evidence that Stone’s radicalism led him to work for the KGB has been eviscerated many times,” and he dubs Berman

“the useful idiot of George W. Bush,” as if Bush policy today has anything to do with criticism of I. F. Stone. And in *The American Prospect Online*, Eric Alterman of *The Nation* accuses Berman of “an extreme disservice to the truth—and a massive favor to its enemies,” by giving credence to what Alterman calls the “almost entirely bogus controversy over whether Stone willingly spied for the Russians or cooperated with the KGB.” Alterman knows with certainty that “[Stone] did not.” He calls it a “damn shame” that Berman now spreads such conjecture to a wide audience. Again, Berman ably defended himself and noted the following in an October 4 answer to Alterman: “Why should we be surprised to learn that [Stone] acted on the principles that he expressed in his own writings, and ended up performing tasks for the KGB out of a spirit of friendly cooperation?”

Precisely. Stone’s giant blind spot affected his reporting and analysis for way too long. It was not until 1956—the time of the Khrushchev report and the Soviet invasion of Hungary—that he had second thoughts. The anthology offers a poignant 1956 report from Moscow, that resulted in Stone losing 600 subscriptions from Communists and their sympathizers. His candid judgment of Soviet society: “*This is not a good society and it is not led by honest men.*” If it was a paradise, he wrote, it was only “for a rather stupid type of Communist Party member.” Stone let readers know his fellow-traveling was over. Those who wanted social change, he wrote, could not join “hands with the poor deluded house-broken Communist parties of the West” who were mere “Russian puppets,” willing to “jump through the hoops as soon as they get new orders.”

After 1956, and as the evidence mounted after the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, Stone had stopped being a dupe. His problem was not persistent illusions about the Soviet Union; rather, it was his belief that American democratic capitalism was doomed and that some form of “socialism” was the only answer for the future. Stone

also was a fierce believer in the doctrine of moral equivalence; if the Soviet Union had become bad, the United States must at least as bad. Moscow did anything to preserve a zone of security in Eastern Europe; the United States did the same in Latin America. Opposing the war in Vietnam, he called Ho Chi Minh “a very human man” and a leader who wanted a “democratic state,” not a Communist one. His naiveté matched that of the anti-war movement, whose leaders knew what Ho really was—a devoted Stalinist—but who sought to portray him for American audiences as “the George Washington of Vietnam.” As Stone himself admitted, those who were friendly toward the nations he called socialist states were dismissed as dupes. They were in the Stalin years, Stone commented. He concluded, however, “events have also shown that in the long run the dupes prove less misleading than the dopes.”

Stone’s judgment makes it easy to identify where he went wrong. Indeed, an opposite conclusion makes more sense. Those he called dopes—hardly a balanced word—in fact proved more accurate than the dupes. While Stone hoped for co-existence with the Soviet Union, Ronald Reagan correctly described it as an “evil empire” and hoped for its eventual demise. Even Susan Sontag, in a rare moment of lucidity, told a Town Hall meeting in defense of Poland’s Solidarity movement that those who learned about Communism from *Reader’s Digest* knew more of the truth than those who read *The Nation*. To his credit, Stone did sign Joan Baez’s letter criticizing the Vietnamese Communists at the war’s end, something many on the Left refused to do. But during the war, when A. J. Muste, Norman Thomas, and Bayard Rustin signed a statement that peace groups should not support the Viet Cong, and should stand “independent of any form of totalitarianism,” and should not participate in marches led by Communists and their supporters, Stone stood with the New Left, supported the marchers, and broke with his old associates from the Socialist anti-Communist left.

Stone had to be a man of the Left, always hoping for a society that would blend together Jeffersonian liberalism with Marxist collectivism. That this dream was itself an oxymoron eluded him. He looked with longing to the young Cuban revolutionaries in 1959, who he thought were creating just such a nation—and so close to the United States! He went to Cuba and began to suffer disillusionment, although he kept his fears to himself and dealt with it by criticizing U.S. policy. He never returned to the island.

Stone's greatest contribution was undoubtedly his reporting and commitment to the Jews of the Palestine *yishuv* and the effort to create a Jewish state in Palestine. His identification with world Jewry was too deep to ignore, and his courageous reporting from one of the refugee ships taking European Jews to Palestine became a classic, widely distributed by Jewish groups in America, and helped to create nationwide sympathy for the Zionist effort.

Myra MacPherson argues that even at that time Stone favored a bi-national rather than a Jewish state. Stone's few columns advocating such an outcome, however, were written before Israel's creation, and echoed the sentiment of Jewish intellectuals such as Judah Magnes. But once Israel was created, Stone became its most ardent defender. Indeed, he wrote a coffee-table book, with photos by Robert Capa, called *This Is Israel*. Stone's text reads like a love letter to the new Jewish state. Strangely, MacPherson seems unaware that Stone wrote this book. Its title does not even appear in her bibliography of Stone's writings. Stone, along with the rest of the American Left, later moved his focus to the plight of the Palestinians and became very critical of Israel.

Stone's greatest fault was always to seek to remain part of the self-proclaimed progressive Left. Let me end with one personal story, not dealt with in MacPherson's

book, that illustrates this. When Joyce Milton and I wrote *The Rosenberg File*, we started the book with a quote from Stone that demonstrated his doubts about the couple's innocence. Stone had called our publisher to express his support for our project and his desire to see the book in print. But when he saw the galleys, with the quote from him in the front, he went ballistic. Stone demanded that it be removed, that it seemed to indicate to readers that he supported our book, and that he would sue unless it was taken out.

I answered Stone with a letter, in which I said I was shocked that I. F. Stone would seek to censor a book, to prohibit us from using his own words from one of his own columns that clearly was not a blurb, but rather indicated *our* approval of Stone for being one of the few on the Left to question the official line on the Rosenberg case. I told Stone that we were going to use the quote no matter what he did. He came to his senses, and backed down. His original anger made no sense, since he agreed with our view of the case and had said as much, especially when I spent a whole afternoon with him at his home. It could only have been prompted by his awareness that some of his best friends—like his relative Leonard Boudin and Boudin's law partner Victor Rabinowitz—were letting him know how upset they were at the coming publication of our book.

I. F. Stone was a bundle of contradictions: a good reporter; a naïve left-wing ideologue; a fellow-traveler who was embarrassed in later days about his youthful pro-Soviet leanings; a supporter of Israel who turned against it; a man who could speak sense about America's great failure, segregation, but who above all wanted to be part of the anti-anti-Communist Left. To look back at his columns and his career is to recall a sad earlier time. It is hardly a guide for what journalists today should strive towards.