Melita Norwood (née Sirnis), born in 1912 in Dorset, England, was the daughter of a Latvian father and English mother. In 1932 she became a secretary at the British Non-Ferrous Metals Research Association (BN-FMRA). She joined the Communist Party of Great Britain and was recruited to be a spy for the Soviet military intelligence agency (GRU) and later for the Soviet state security organs (NKGB, a forerunner of the KGB). Her job as secretary to G. I. Bailey, the assistant director (from 1944, director) of BN-FMRA gave her access to its files. According to David Burke, her access to the classified information made her a “major spy.” The value of the book depends on how well Burke is able to substantiate this claim, and unfortunately he falls far short. In an effort to enhance the importance of his subject, he repeatedly inflates her contribution, even going so far as to claim that her espionage “would advance the Soviet atomic bomb programme by several years.” Going even further out on a limb, Burke told The Sunday Telegraph of London, “The information provided by Melita was invaluable to the Russians and speeded up their nuclear bomb programme by five years.” Such claims are fanciful, indeed delusional, when the facts are examined.

Editors have advised me that in writing a biography you should try to mention your subject on almost every page. This keeps the author and reader focused on what is important. Burke had no such editor and has not followed this advice. Page after page, even chapters, go by with no mention of Norwood as Burke wanders through detailed descriptions of people and places that have little or no relevance to the topic at hand. Burke’s specialty (and Ph.D. dissertation topic) is Tsarist Russian émigrés, and he devotes many pages of extraneous detail to them. The poor reader holds on, hoping to be led back to the Norwood story only to veer off down another trail.

Obviously Burke had a problem. He did not have enough interesting material for a biography of Norwood, so he threw in everything else he could find about espionage during the period. We learn very little about Norwood’s life and personality and what she did at her job. She all but disappears in what was supposed to be a biography about her. The book is short to begin with, and if the padding and logorrhea had been excised, as a responsible editor should have demanded, it would have ended up at the length of only an article, at most.

We keep waiting and waiting to learn what exactly Norwood passed to the Soviet Union that was so important. Finally after 128 pages we get an answer of sorts, an
anticlimax if there ever was one. We are told that her contribution is significant on two counts: that she had access to BN-FMRA documents and to the documents of other industrial bodies, including Metro-Vickers and ICI. What were those documents? Was the information in them of any value? Which documents were passed to the Soviet Union? Most important of all, in what ways did they help the Soviet program? Burke never asks these crucial questions. Nor does he have any answers, and the reason is clear: he has no idea what information Norwood passed or whether it was worth anything in advancing the Soviet bomb program. Throughout he assumes what he should be proving and uses faulty logic to arrive at his unsubstantiated conclusions. The only detail Burke offers is a claim that some of the information had to do with “the corrosive nature of the fluoride gas on uranium metal,” hardly earthshaking and left unexplained by Burke.

At a more fundamental level Burke might have asked more basic questions to try to make his case. For example, what sort of work did BN-FMRA do that was connected to the nuclear bomb? To describe his treatment of BN-FMRA as cursory is generous. Did anyone who worked there know anything about the British Tube Alloys effort or, more importantly, the U.S. Manhattan Project? Burke is silent, and again the reason is clear. BN-FMRA was on the fringe of the fringe. Anything important was unlikely to arrive on the association’s doorstep. Compartmentalization was the dominant security method of the Manhattan Project. The guiding principle was that participants needed to know only enough to do their jobs and nothing more. Tens of thousands of people were employed on the nuclear bomb project, and all but a small percentage were unaware of what they were working on until 6 August 1945. Burke interviewed Norwood at least a half-dozen times but never bothered to ask her what she knew at the time. With regard to sources it is odd that Burke makes no use of the official history of the British program, Margaret Gowing’s *Britain and Atomic Energy, 1939–1945* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1964).

Burke has little understanding of the chronology and organization of the Manhattan Project or the British relationship to it. Near the end of the book we learn the interesting fact that only in March 1945 did BN-FMRA secure a contract with Tube Alloys, rather late in the game. Burke goes on to make the ridiculous statement that from March 1945 to 6 August, “Britain’s contribution to the Manhattan project had been essentially limited to work on the diffusion process and the implosion method for assembling a plutonium bomb.” That such a sentence could be written testifies to his lack of knowledge of how the nuclear bomb was developed and Britain’s contribution.

In his repeated efforts to inflate Norwood’s importance, Burke bundles her with Klaus Fuchs—by all measures the most important nuclear spy of them all—with such sentences as, “The information they had supplied to Sonya [their GRU controller, Ursula Kuczynski] on Britain’s atomic bomb programme had found a direct route to the scientific director of the Soviet nuclear project, Igor Kurchatov” (emphasis added). How much was from Fuchs (probably 99 percent) and how much from Norwood (probably one percent)? Burke makes no effort to sort it out and leaves the reader with a false impression of Norwood’s contribution.
Burke has his own peculiar understanding of how the nuclear bomb was built. He gives a great deal of credit to Fuchs but then claims two gaps in the scientists’ knowledge. “First, they knew very little about the creep properties of uranium and had yet to develop a fully coherent theory of corrosion of non-ferrous metals critical to the design of a nuclear reactor. Without a solution to those problems Fuch’s theoretical knowledge of the bomb had no practical application.” Burke apparently is implying that (1) these problems were not solved by 1945 and (2) that BN-FMRA had something to do with their solution. Had Burke bothered to do a little more research on the real Manhattan Project he would have discovered how the solutions were arrived at in the spring and summer of 1944 by DuPont engineers and University of Chicago scientists, with no help from the British.

Norwood’s espionage was first disclosed by Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin in *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). Mitrokhin, a KGB archivist in the 1970s and early 1980s, defected in 1992 and brought with him notes from his years working with KGB documents. He turned the notes over to British MI6 officials. After publication of the book, based on those notes, the UK Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) conducted an inquiry into how the British government had handled the information provided by Mitrokhin. Many of the ISC’s observations and conclusions on the Norwood case deflate Burke’s effort to enhance her importance as a “major spy.” For example, the ISC noted that “in the 1940s BN-FMRA’s contract for Tube Alloys (and subsequently the Ministry of Supply) was not directly weapons-related and involved work only on very specialized and limited metallurgical investigations connected with reactor technology.”

Burke alleges that solving the “canning” problem was one of the ways Norwood advanced the Soviet bomb, but the facts intrude to undermine his claim. Canning has to do with protecting the cylindrical slugs of uranium metal against corrosion. Slugs are inserted into aluminum cans and then into the fuel rods that are loaded into a reactor. The British were cut out of any information about U.S. reactor technologies because of the security restrictions imposed by General Leslie R. Groves, and they had to develop their own canning designs. Soviet scientists adopted U.S. reactor designs and canning methods, information not available to the British (and therefore not to BN-FMRA or Norwood). The question once more arises of how exactly Norwood’s information helped the Soviet Union. Burke again fails to address this crucial question.

The ISC concluded that the material Norwood could have provided to the Soviet Union was limited in scope and “thus her value as an atom spy to the scientists who constructed the Soviet bomb must have been at most, marginal.”

Norwood’s espionage career after 1949, when her access to classified documents ended, is obscure, and Burke does nothing to clarify it. He says that in 1951 she “was working within the ‘legal’ residency operating from inside the Soviet embassy.” What exactly does this confusing sentence mean? Even Burke apparently does not know insofar as he admits: “The nature of that work is difficult to assess as she no longer had access to classified information.” He goes on to tell us that she continued to work for
“Moscow centre” until she retired in 1972. Decades of her life fly by, and we get no idea of what she did.

In the history of nuclear espionage Norwood was a minor figure, no matter how much Burke wants us to believe otherwise.


Reviewed by Roy Domenico, University of Scranton

Kaeten Mistry’s ably researched and argued book is based on the premise that Italy’s elections of April 1948 had “profound ramifications” (p. 2) for both the country itself and the United States. Of the two, Mistry emphasizes Washington’s story more than Rome’s. He asks how Italy, despite its status as a “peripheral concern” (p. 4–5) for the United States, assumed central importance in Washington’s postwar struggle with Moscow and how the United States drew lessons from the Italian case. Mistry’s book is not a history of the April 1948 vote and should not be directly compared to Robert Ventresca’s excellent study of that election, *From Fascism to Democracy: Culture and Politics in the Italian Elections of 1948* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004). Although Mistry makes effective use of Italy’s Central State Archives and Foreign Ministry Archives, most of his sources are found in the United States, and his work focuses on U.S. officials and labor union leaders—those in Washington such as George F. Kennan, James Forrestal, and George Marshall; those at the Rome embassy, particularly Ambassador James Dunn; and labor figures such as Irving Brown and Jay Lovestone—and on their bureaucratic battles. Mistry describes these skirmishes within the larger Cold War struggles, providing the reader with a sometimes bewildering clash of alphabet soup agencies—AUSA, ECA, OPC, SANACC, and so forth—the kind of acronyms that enthrall bureaucrats.

The U.S. government’s heavy-handedness has long marred U.S.-Italian relations, and Mistry shows that here, too, most U.S. policymakers viewed the Italians as, at best, “feminine and infantile” (p. 17) and political children who needed Uncle Sam’s strong guiding hand, and that for U.S. officials “indigenous factors were of secondary concern” (p. 178). Such condescension has frequently led to blithe ignorance. Ambassador Dunn and the embassy’s Treasury Department attaché, Henry Tasca, stood out among U.S. officials in actually understanding the Italian situation and wanting to take account of local factors. Mistry calls attention to the Italians—Luigi Gedda and his Civic Committees, Alcide De Gasperi with the Christian Democrats, and Pope Pius XII—although they are relegated to secondary roles. As one might imagine, Italians remember the events of 1948 differently. In 1988, for instance, a Catholic writer, Federico Orlando, published a study of the election under the title *18 Aprile: Così ci salvammo* [18 April: How We Saved Ourselves] (Rome: Cinque Lune, 1988), a title that George Marshall would have found preposterous. The U.S. secretary of state and most of