
Reviewed by R. Bruce Craig, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton

*True Believer* chronicles the life and times of Cold War–era espionage agent Noel Field and, to a lesser extent, the life of his wife, Herta, both of whom remained steadfast believers in the ideals and promises of Soviet-style Communism even when it had fallen out of fashion. In telling their story, Kati Marton paints a vivid and somewhat sympathetic portrait of the couple. She draws in a cast of characters, including Paul and Hede Massing, Alger Hiss, Lawrence Duggan, J. Peters (aka Sandor Goldberger), Allen Dulles, “Wild Bill” Donovan, and Iosif Stalin. A major strength of the book is Marton’s success in integrating these characters and their beliefs into the context of the times. The result is not only a balanced biography of Noel Field but also a nuanced account of espionage during the Red Decade and early Cold War era.

Marton is uniquely qualified to tell this story. Like Field, her father was a political prisoner of the Hungarian Communists who for a time occupied the same cell with Field. Later, after both men were released from prison, Marton’s parents interviewed Noel and Herta, earning the distinction of being the only Western journalists ever to do so. Marton came to possess her parent’s notes of that interview, which, when combined with private correspondence from cooperating surviving members of the Field family, enabled her to flesh out the story of Noel Field, assessing his motives and adely placing him in his era.

Like many others of his generation who were seduced by the promise of Soviet-style internationalism, an idealistic Noel Field joined the Communist movement thinking it would be able to right all the social and political wrongs of the world. In the 1930s, fascism was on the rise, and capitalism seemed to be in decline. For Field and others of his ilk, however, Stalin’s Soviet Union offered a promise of a new day dawning. Marton traces the story of how Field not only came to embrace Communism but also eventually became an underground agent for Soviet foreign intelligence. Her book chronicles the tale of how compromising one’s principles and exchanging them for unquestioning idealism, submission, service, and sacrifice not only ruined Field’s life but also wreaked havoc with the lives of his family and friends.

Marton portrays Field as a “sensitive, self-absorbed idealist and dreamer . . . an unlikely revolutionary” who became an ideal target for “conversion to a powerful faith” (p. 3). Raised in a devout Quaker family in which pacifism and service were core values, Field attended America’s most privileged sanctuary of higher learning, Harvard
University. There he became convinced of the injustice of the capitalist system’s distribution of wealth. Moved by Charles Beard’s tome The Rise of American Civilization and having absorbed articles found in the Communist Party’s main newspaper, The Daily Worker, Field became a secret Communist.

The election of Herbert Hoover—a man who possessed a proud record of humanitarian intervention during World War I—failed to impress Field. He viewed his fellow Quaker’s response to the Great Depression as a heartless disaster. After completing Harvard’s degree requirements in two rather than four years, the brilliant young intellect landed a comfortable job in the U.S. State Department, where, Field recalled years later, he “gradually started to live an illegal life, separate from my official life” (p. 40). Like other Communists, fellow travelers, and left-leaning New Dealers affiliated with the “Ware Group,” such as Hope Hale Davis, the Massings, Hiss, John Abt, and Field’s best friend, Duggan, Field embraced near-unconditional obedience to Communist ideals. Marton beautifully illustrates this point in one episode as she separates fact from fiction in telling the controversial tale of the espionage recruitment “competition” between Hiss and Hede Massing as both sought to gain Field’s cooperation and assistance in providing documents for their respective Soviet intelligence agencies.

Much of the book focuses on Field’s prewar experiences in Spain, France, and Switzerland and his wartime activities in Eastern and Central Europe, which took place after he left the State Department and had gone to work for the newly formed Unitarian Service Committee (USC). In the cause to defeat the Axis powers, Field’s penchant for working with the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in support of operations being conducted in Nazi-occupied Central and Eastern Europe while at the same time maintaining his ties with the Soviet underground and their affiliated Communist parties, ultimately raised questions in the minds of his Soviet superiors about his devotion to the internationalist movement.

Field scrambled to find his place in the postwar world. By 1948 he was, Marton writes, not only a man without a job but also (worse yet) “a man without a country” (p. 133). When looking for work in Prague, Field learned of Whittaker Chambers’s allegations before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) naming him, along with Hiss, Harry Dexter White, and others, as being secret Communists. Understandably reluctant to return to the United States, Field received a timely invitation from the Czechoslovak Ministry of Interior to study and teach at Charles University in Prague. The offer was a ruse. Instead of giving him a job, his hosts slapped his face with a chloroform-soaked rag, abducted him, and transported him to the headquarters of the Hungarian secret police, where he was accused of being a spy in the service of U.S. imperialists and subjected to beatings and torture. Not knowing what had happened, the U.S. press concluded that the Soviet spy had cleverly slipped behind the Iron Curtain to avoid having to testify before HUAC. In the United States Field was merely convicted in the court of public opinion, whereas in Hungary a court of law found him guilty of espionage and transferred him to a maximum-security prison in Budapest.
Field experienced a four-year ordeal in various Hungarian prisons until a reprieve came in 1954. One might have expected that after suffering so long under the yoke of Communist interrogation he would have come to loathe his captors upon his release. But even in his twilight years, Field retained his steadfast devotion to Communist ideals. He characterized whatever “mistakes” had been made by Communist authorities as “temporary aberrations” (p. 220) and concluded that “the wrongs have been righted, the wrong-doers punished, our innocence recognized” (p. 221). Field lived the rest of his quiet, albeit severely diminished, life as one of the last devotees to Communist ideology. Only after the Soviet Union sent troops to quell the 1968 Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia did he finally stop paying his Communist Party dues.

If one were to find fault with the book, it would be that Marton does not adequately explain how Field reconciled his actions with his Quaker beliefs. Did he just abandon those beliefs, or did he feel he was remaining true to the “inner voice” that has led so many Quakers over the last 400 years to stand firm in their convictions—beliefs that have often proven unorthodox, non-conformist, and even radical. Marton is also silent in assessing the relative value of information Field supplied to his Soviet controllers, though she concludes he was “not much of a spy” (p. 245). More sympathetically, she characterizes him as a deluded unfortunate “who set out to change the world but ended up a stranger in a strange land” (p. 249).

True Believer is a wonderfully researched, beautifully told, and chilling story of how fanaticism arises and how one man and his circle of friends became prisoners to ideology. A big thumbs-up for this one!


Reviewed by Deborah Kaple, Princeton University

Mark Harrison’s rich, thoughtful, and important book chronicles everyday lives in the Soviet police state and illuminates the many comic, sad, and bizarre aspects of Soviet life in the 1930s through the 1970s. Harrison culled these stories from Soviet Lithuania’s State Security Committee (KGB) files as a corrective to the human tendency to glamorize the past. Too many Russians regard the Soviet government as “caring” and “comfortable.” The stories Harrison brings to light are a reminder that life was pretty miserable in the empire and that memory cannot be relied on to tell the truth.

To make sense of the crazy, convoluted, and time-consuming spying that these chapters describe, Harrison helpfully provides seven working principles that any police state must observe if it is to stop its subjects from straying: (1) Your enemy is hiding; (2) Start from the usual suspects; (3); Study the young; (4) Stop the laughing; (5) Rebellion spreads like wildfire; (6) Stamp out every spark; and (7) Order is created by