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John P. Koster, *Operation Snow: How a Soviet Mole in FDR's White House Triggered Pearl Harbor*. Washington: Regnery, 2012. Pp. xxi, 250. ISBN 978-1-59698-322-9.

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As soon as the smoke cleared over the devastation of Pearl Harbor, the blame game began, and more than seventy years later, it continues. Initially, blame fell, fairly or not, on the commanders of the American land and naval forces in Hawaii—Lt. Gen. Walter Short and Adm. Husband Kimmel. In more recent years, of course, writers like Robert Stinnett<sup>1</sup> have pointed the finger of guilt at President Franklin Roosevelt, arguing that the White House incited and permitted the attack in order to bring the United States into the war. In *Operation Snow*, journalist and teacher John Koster (Ramapo College) adds a new twist: it was all Josef Stalin's fault.

Koster's previous work has concerned Native American and American military history.<sup>2</sup> But he also has an interest in the clash of cultures in the Pacific region, which seems to have drawn him to his present topic. To be precise, Koster lays primary responsibility for Pearl Harbor and the resultant Japanese-American conflict at the feet of Harry Dexter White, then a US Treasury official, who

was never actually a member of the Communist Party USA. He worked under deep cover, posing as a conventional, rather conservative economist whose specialty was international financial relations. On the surface, he never ventured farther to the left than his one-time hero John Maynard Keynes, the British economist. Behind the scenes, White was the brains behind Henry Morgenthau, Jr., who in turn tried to be the brains behind Franklin D. Roosevelt. (9)

White indeed harbored pro-Soviet sympathies and, as early as 1935, was supplying information to a GRU (Soviet military intelligence) spy ring managed by Whittaker Chambers.<sup>3</sup> To be fair, White later vociferously denied any disloyalty, and a few defenders still proclaim his innocence. Nonetheless, "the evidence is overwhelming. Harry Dexter White assisted Soviet military intelligence in the mid-1930s and the KGB from 1943 to 1945 and perjured himself in his congressional testimony."<sup>4</sup> However, this does not prove Koster's specific allegation.

The author lays out his main argument in the first of his book's thirteen chapters, describing an April 1941 meeting in Washington between White and newly-arrived NKVD (later KGB) intelligence officer Vitaly Pavlov. The gripping, cloak-and-dagger account of this meeting is adapted from Pavlov's own memoir, also titled *Operation Snow*.<sup>5</sup> A key topic of conversation was the menace presented by Japan's unbridled aggression in the Far East. Adolf Hitler's attack on the USSR was still more than two months away, but fear of a two-front war haunted Moscow. Conflict between Japan and the United States would divert Tokyo's attention and resources. The problem, Koster writes, was that "Japan did not want a war with the United States in 1941 and did whatever it could to avoid such a war" (xxi). Pavlov, therefore, urged White to use his influence to advocate for a more confrontational and provocative stance by the Roosevelt Administration.

White eagerly agreed and the result was his "May Memorandum," detailed in chapter 5, which set out an absurd plan insisting not only that Japan withdraw from China and other occupied territories but also

1. *Day of Deceit: The Truth about FDR and Pearl Harbor* (NY: Free Pr, 2000).

2. *Custer Survivor: The End of a Myth, the Beginning of a Legend* (Palisades, NY: Chronology Books, 2010), and, with Robert Burnette, *The Road to Wounded Knee* (NY: Bantam, 1974).

3. See Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Alexander Vassiliev, *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2009) 259.

4. *Ibid.* 262.

5. *Operatsiia "Sneg": Polevka vo vneshnei razvedke KGB* (Moscow: Geia, 1996).

“lease” half of its navy to the United States! If White’s aim was to antagonize the Japanese, he succeeded. In November 1941, just weeks before Pearl Harbor, White issued a second memorandum stipulating even harsher terms. Through these documents, Koster suggests, White, via his influence with Morgenthau, and Morgenthau’s with FDR, forestalled peace talks between Tokyo and Washington, backed the Japanese into a corner, and thereby set in motion the fatal events of 7 December 1941.

The biggest problem with Koster’s argument is that it gives far too much weight to White and his memoranda. Other historians have duly noted the Pavlov-White machinations but correctly observe that “there were other forces at work pushing toward Japanese-American confrontation, a clash implicit in much that had preceded.... Nor is there any indication in this history that the Soviets knew Pearl Harbor would be Japan’s intended target.”<sup>6</sup> Simply put, there is nothing to prove that Harry Dexter White was instrumental in bringing on a war between the United States and Japan.

Moreover, it is doubtful that White could even be considered a Soviet agent in 1941. As mentioned above, he did pass information to GRU agents in the late 1930s, but this stopped after the defections of Chambers and others temporarily shut down those spy networks. Pavlov later described his brief visit to the United States as basically an observation mission and his meeting with White as purely an “evaluation.”<sup>7</sup> He made no claim to have recruited White as a “mole” or anything else. Indeed, the Soviet files later viewed by Alexander Vassiliev note that White’s “first direct covert KGB contact” did not occur until July 1944.<sup>8</sup> So, was White acting in what he believed to be the Soviet Union’s best interest in his 1941 memoranda? Almost certainly. But was he doing so as a formal agent of Soviet intelligence? No.

Thus, Koster’s argument does not hold water. That being said, *Operation Snow* is not without value. Only five chapters deal substantially with White and his activities, including his eventual testimony before Congress. To make his point that White was lying, Koster reproduces some twenty-five pages of testimony by both White and his nemesis, Whittaker Chambers. Much of the rest of the book is essentially background on American-Japanese and Soviet-Japanese relations and Japanese internal politics, touching on topics as wide-ranging as the Russo-Japanese and Russo-Finnish wars and the US Navy’s War Plan Orange. Specialists in these fields will discover little that is new here, but general readers may find this to be the most valuable part of the book. Koster takes a broadly (some might say overly) sympathetic view of Japan’s position, but he at least manages to portray Japanese leadership as more than a lock-step cabal of fanatical militarists bent on rapine and conquest. He also has a fascinating chapter on Kilsoo Haan, the Korean nationalist who provided a different, amazingly accurate, prediction of the Pearl Harbor attack, while another chapter surveys the scapegoat frenzy that followed.

Koster closes by asserting that White’s sudden death in August 1948, officially the result of a heart attack, was in fact a suicide by overdose of digitalis—“On the train back to his farm in New Hampshire, White took stock of his options. Once Whittaker Chambers confronted him, an indictment would only be a matter of time. Roosevelt was dead. Morgenthau was gone and discredited.... The shift in foreign policy from anti-Nazi to anti-Soviet meant that White could not expect any support or sympathy. He was one step away from being tried for treason, and he knew it” (204). Perhaps. But, as Koster admits, any evidence vanished with White’s quickly cremated remains. And, on the other hand, both of White’s parents died in their forties of cardiac ailments.

To sum up, although John Koster fails to prove his central thesis, other, diverse details make *Operation Snow* well worth reading.

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6. M. Stanton Evans and Herbert Rommerstein, *Stalin’s Secret Agents: The Subversion of Roosevelt’s Government* (NY: Threshold Editions, 2012) 97.

7. “Pavlov, Vitaly Grigorievich, (1914–2005),” DocumentsTalk.com: A Non-Definitive History, citing a 1997 interview with Svetlana Chervonnaya – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1423.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1423.htm).

8. *Spies* (note 3 above) 260.