

# ELIZABETH BENTLEY: Silver-tongued Spy Queen

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*In 1945, the American-born Soviet spy Elizabeth Bentley betrayed her espionage network to the FBI and attempted to forge a career in anti-communist writing. Her first and only written work, an autobiography entitled *Out of Bondage*, is infamous for its literary and commercial failures. Despite marketing itself as a tell-all book from Bentley's perspective as a defecting spy, it is filled with falsehoods and mischaracterizations both of Bentley and those she interacted with during her career. This paper attempts to analyze Bentley's reasons for publishing the book as it was, using contemporary gender issues as a lens and Victor Kravchenko's autobiography *I Chose Freedom* as a device to compare *Out of Bondage* to another famous work in the anti-communist genre.*

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In 1952, one of the most prominent American anti-communists in history found herself penniless and without a vehicle after speeding into a parked car.<sup>1</sup> Her name was Elizabeth Bentley, and later that month she was set to testify in the trial of Julius Rosenberg. This case later became known as “the Trial of the Century,” and the FBI needed to ensure Bentley’s credibility as a key witness.<sup>2</sup> After hushing up the press and springing her from a local jail, the FBI still had to deal with an uncooperative Bentley. She walked into the FBI office, sat herself down, and refused to leave until they paid off all her debts, doubled her salary, and provided her with a new method of transportation.<sup>3</sup>

Elizabeth Bentley, formerly a spy for the Soviet Union and later a professional anti-communist from 1946 until her death in 1963, was a perennial thorn in the side of her Bureau handlers. In particular, her lack of finances and dependence on alcohol proved a complication in their task of preserving her image for the coming trial. Bentley’s most recent financial scheme, the publication of a “tell all” autobiography detailing her life as an agent for the NKVD, met with underwhelming results.<sup>4</sup> This was a popular career-making method for other prominent anti-communists of the time. Soviet defector Victor Kravchenko and former spy Louis Budenz both made significant amounts of money off of their own autobiographical works. Bentley’s,

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<sup>1</sup>A. Belmont, “Urgent,” Typescript, New Haven FBI Office, 1952.

<sup>2</sup> Kathryn S. Olmstead, *Red Spy Queen: A Biography of Elizabeth Bentley* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas J. McAndrews, “RE: Elizabeth Bentley,” Typescript, New Haven FBI Office, September 29, 1952.

<sup>4</sup> Olmstead, *Red Spy Queen*, 166-168.

published in 1951 under the title *Out of Bondage*, would not see nearly this level of success.<sup>5</sup>

*Out of Bondage* needed to solve not only Bentley's financial problems, but also issues with her public image. As a woman, Bentley faced a different set of challenges compared to her male counterparts. Generally, all a male anti-communist had to do was denounce his former ideology to be accepted with open arms back into normal everyday American life. Female anti-communists tended to face much more scrutiny by the general public.<sup>6</sup> A host of stereotypes and prejudices that emerged during the late 1930s forced Bentley to pursue certain strategies in the creation of *Out of Bondage* in order to receive forgiveness from the American public. In essence, *Out of Bondage* is an attempt by Bentley to forge a new identity for herself, one which Americans could forgive, and one that manipulated sexist prejudices in a way that was beneficial to her.<sup>7</sup> This was a task of considerable difficulty for someone such as Bentley, who spent so much time in the spotlight. So, how did Bentley use language and existing contemporary gendered stereotypes to further her own interests and forge a new identity through her writing?

The answer lies in examining the differences between Bentley's writing and the writings of contemporary male anti-communists; specifically, Victor Kravchenko and his autobiography *I Chose Freedom*. The key difference between these two authors and their defining works is their use of dialogue (both internal and with others) to express ideological conflicts. In the case of *I Chose Freedom*, Kravchenko spends pages delving into how he was persuaded by the ideas of communism and revolution and how deeply he studied Marxism during his formative years. More critically, he details arguments and debates with key figures in his life, including his co-workers and his closest family members. This all builds to the conclusion that Kravchenko was rigorously and intellectually committed to the Soviet Union and its ideological project.<sup>8</sup>

This starkly contrasts with *Out of Bondage*. Bentley rarely includes any ideological arguments beyond the surface level of believing things like poverty and violence are better avoided. She directly refutes any charge that she understands Marxism and sparsely has any internal dialogue on why collectivism may or may not be superior to privatization. Most tellingly, *Out of Bondage* has almost no capitalist characters, while there is an over-abundance of communists. That is to say, no one ever challenges Bentley on communism across 344 pages of a book that is ostensibly about a spy struggling with her own loyalties. At no point in *Out of Bondage* does any character question her loyalty to the communist underground or suggest to her that her chosen ideology might be flawed. Never does the character of Elizabeth Bentley discuss or debate the merits of communism or capitalism with anyone. On the surface, this seems like a bizarre omission and a strange choice for an author to make. After

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that portions of *Out of Bondage* were likely ghost-written by John Gilland Brunini, a prominent poet of the time. It is impossible to know which portions were written by Bentley and which were written by him (Olmstead, *Red Spy Queen*, 168). Either way, Bentley had the final say as to what was printed. So, for the purposes of this paper, the author of *Out of Bondage* will be universally referred to as Bentley.; Denise M. Lynn, *Where is Juliet Stuart Poyntz?* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Lynn, *Where is Juliet Stuart Poyntz?*, 139; Landon R. Y. Storrs, "Attacking the Washington 'Femmocracy': Antifeminism in the Cold War Campaign against 'Communists in Government,'" *Feminist Studies* 33, no. 1 (2007): 118–52.

<sup>7</sup> Lynn, *Where is Juliet Stuart Poyntz?*, 142.

<sup>8</sup> Victor Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom* (Garden City: Garden City Publishing Co Inc., 1946).

all, much of the drama in spy fiction revolves around the clashing of ideologies. Stories about spies are enhanced by examinations of why they chose to spy and what motivated them to betray the trust of their home country and their close friends. However, on closer examination it becomes clear that this choice was calculated. In order to paint herself as naive and misled, but an ultimately good, traditional American woman, Elizabeth Bentley used her control over both the portrayal of her internal dialogue and the dialogue spoken by other figures in *Out of Bondage*. Whereas Kravchenko is able to paint himself as an intellectual who battled internally over his values and argued about them constantly with those around him, Bentley has to be portrayed as ignorant and opposing viewpoints must be fully omitted from the narrative.

The academic literature currently available on Elizabeth Bentley has expanded dramatically within the last two decades with an emphasis on *Out of Bondage* and Bentley's relationship to contemporary gender politics. An early and often cited example of this approach is the 1999 article, "Elizabeth Bentley and Cold War Representation: Some Masks Not Dropped," written by Veronica A. Wilson for the summer edition of the *Intelligence and National Security* journal. In it, Wilson puts forward the argument that Bentley constructed a persona of traditional morality and sexual temperance in order to serve her own interests and ease her re-entry into normal American life.<sup>9</sup> This was a major departure from previous historical work on Bentley that enhanced academia's understanding of her as a figure with individual agency and intellect beyond what was previously understood. This way of thinking was further developed by Kathryn Olmstead's 2003 biography, *Red Spy Queen*. In it, Olmstead establishes a now generally accepted factual account of Bentley's life. She qualifies a number of the statements she makes with the caveat that much of what Bentley says in interviews, testimony, and in her writings cannot be trusted due to the regular distortions she made regarding her early life and motivations.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Olmstead discusses the influence that other contemporary anti-communists had on Bentley.<sup>11</sup> Finally, *Where is Juliet Stuart Poyntz?* by Denise M. Lynn, published in 2021, provides a relatively fresh examination of *Out of Bondage*. It explores the idea of dialogue being used to craft a persona, but only examines it in the specific instances where Bentley mischaracterizes communist leader Juliet Stuart Poyntz in order to paint herself as pure and temperate in contrast.<sup>12</sup> Naturally, all three of these works discuss in detail the intersection of Bentley's dual identities as both an ex-communist and a woman, and how this intersection directed her efforts to regain the trust of the American public and establish herself as a credible figure in anti-communist discourse.

While work has been done on Bentley's use of language in *Out of Bondage*, this article will focus more on how Bentley used dialogue to specifically paint herself as non-ideological or naive in order to adjust to contemporary preconceptions of gender. It will do so through comparison to *I Chose Freedom* as a genre defining work in anti-communist literature. This specific comparative lensing of *Out of Bondage* through *I Chose Freedom* as an examination of gender roles in the writing of the former book has not yet been seen in the academic literature. This will serve to reinforce existing literature like *Red Spy Queen* and *Where is Juliet Stuart Poyntz?* by introducing a new avenue of examination for *Out of Bondage*.

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<sup>9</sup> Veronica A. Wilson, "Elizabeth Bentley and Cold War Representation: Some Masks Not Dropped," *Intelligence and National Security* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1999), 49-69.

<sup>10</sup> Olmstead, *Red Spy Queen*, 132-133, 192-195.

<sup>11</sup> Olmstead, *Red Spy Queen*, 121.

<sup>12</sup> Lynn, *Where is Juliet Stuart Poyntz?*, 143, 148-156.

The central primary sources of this article consist of Bentley's autobiography, *Out of Bondage*, and Kravchenko's *I Chose Freedom* as the original works, created by two of the most prominent anti-communist writers in American history. These sources work in concert with newspaper articles pulled from both local and nationally printed sources from the 1940s and 1950s that provide a contemporary media perspective on how the American public perceived Elizabeth Bentley when compared to her male counterparts (specifically Louis Budenz and Victor Kravchenko). In addition to newspaper articles, this article also employs a variety of FBI documentation that became declassified in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These comprise of internal memos, letters and reports regarding Elizabeth Bentley and her behavior as a professional witness for the Bureau, as well as her legal and financial troubles. This includes an interview conducted with her to establish the material facts of her life, and reports that indicate she intentionally misled readers with her written work and employed a ghostwriter for sections of *Out of Bondage*.

*Out of Bondage* reinforces existing arguments regarding the life of Elizabeth Bentley and how it speaks to the broader experience of female communists in the postwar period. The public either regarded them as cold, malicious, and calculating, or as naive and misguided children.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, the necessity of Bentley's fabricated personality can be taken as a statement on the restrictive preconceptions regarding gender and ideology of the early Cold War and how they restrained female voices from expressing themselves and presenting their experiences uncensored.

Biographical information on Elizabeth Bentley can be difficult to verify at times. She was known to bend the truth on the finer details of her life, and much of what was said of her as material fact should be taken with a grain of salt. Despite this, there are facts that are likely true about her from declassified FBI reports, memos, and interviews. During these interviews, she had less incentive to deceive, and the interviewer had access to cross-referenceable documentation from earlier statements given by Bentley. Bentley, born in 1908, attended the all-female Vassar College and maintained a life-long passion for education. Her first introduction to communism began in 1934 while studying Marxism in Italy, joining a local anti-fascist activist group.<sup>14</sup> Bentley credited anti-fascism as being her in-road to communism, and in an interview conducted with the FBI in 1952, claimed she was pulled into Communist Party membership by Lee Fuhr, a registered nurse.<sup>15</sup>

Bentley made a swift transition from the open party to the underground, where she began her career in espionage in 1938. Initially, she served as a plant in the Italian Library of Information. Working as a secretary in the library, which was essentially a Manhattan outpost for the Italian propaganda ministry, she passed along any important information she learned to her contact in the communist underground.<sup>16</sup>

Overtime, Bentley transitioned into bigger and better projects within the Communist Party of the United States of America's (CPUSA) spy network. She was eventually assigned as a secretary to Jacob Golos, a Ukrainian-born spy who served as the head of World Tourists. World Tourists was a travel agency that, on paper, facilitated transportation between the east and west, when in reality it smuggled Soviet

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<sup>13</sup> Lynn, *Where is Juliet Stuart Poyntz?*, 127; Storrs, "Attacking the Washington 'Femmocracy,'" 127.

<sup>14</sup> Mr. Kennelly, "RE: Interview with Elizabeth Bentley, Madison, Connecticut, November 13, 1952," Typescript copy, FBI, 1952.

<sup>15</sup> Mr. Kennelly, "RE: Interview with Elizabeth Bentley, Madison, Connecticut, November 13, 1952."

<sup>16</sup> Robert E. Stripling, "Red Party Dues are Collected Including Tax," *Decatur Daily*, February 14, 1949.

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assets into the United States under false papers. Golos was the primary transit man the NKVD had in the United States, and he and Bentley soon became lovers.<sup>17</sup> Golos found Bentley to be a capable secretary and assigned her more important tasks over time. By 1943, Bentley had been promoted to a courier who was collecting information from dozens of contacts across multiple federal agencies, including the War Production Board (a group of contacts denoted as the “Perlo Group” in her later testimony to the House Un-American Activities Committee) and the United States Treasury (The “Silvermaster Group”).<sup>18</sup>

It was not meant to last. In 1943, Golos died of cardiovascular complications, possibly related to the immense stress of managing a spy ring under the watchful eye of the NKVD. This put an immense strain on Bentley’s relationship with her handlers. She found her new contacts prideful, pompous, and irritating. Eventually, she grew paranoid and lonely. She felt isolated from her fellow communists and feared that the FBI was monitoring her. So, in August of 1945, Bentley walked into the FBI office of New Haven Connecticut and turned herself in. Across several days of interviews, she revealed dozens of names and spun an eight-year-long tale of espionage and deceit.<sup>19</sup> While the FBI would not go public with any of her testimony for a few years, they remained cautiously excited at the prospect of this new asset.

Bentley’s career as a professional witness lasted nearly a decade, providing testimony at hearings, trials, and in interviews with the FBI from 1945 into the mid-1950s. She started to make headlines in 1949, with newspapers nationwide reporting on her accusations leveled against the high ranking members of the Silvermaster Group and Alger Hiss, a prominent official of the US State Department.<sup>20</sup> Bentley made broadcasted pleas over television and radio for all communists to abandon the party and follow her lead: “If you were taken in as I was, now’s the time to come forward and do something about it.”<sup>21</sup> This mention of being “taken in” became a common motif in much of Bentley’s writing. In her testimony and writings, Bentley constantly painted herself as an innocent girl who had been manipulated by various communist men into becoming a stooge for the CPUSA.<sup>22</sup>

*Out of Bondage* is the premier example of Bentley using this tactic. The book, published in 1951, is an autobiographical account of Bentley’s life from her childhood until her 1945 defection to the FBI. It is a 344-page slog from start to finish. The book is dry, sparse on literary device and figurative language, and peppered with long-winded unrealistic dialogue where characters monologue about who they are and what they believe. It makes for a drab, un-informative read and was largely panned in its time for these reasons.<sup>23</sup> Many of these blocks of dialogue work together to craft a specific image of Elizabeth Bentley. Bentley frequently employed the characters around her as foils in order to build up a persona of righteousness, traditional American values, and sexual purity.<sup>24</sup> At times, characters go out of their way to

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<sup>17</sup> Olmstead, *Red Spy Queen*, 20-24.

<sup>18</sup> Olmstead, *Red Spy Queen*, 65-69.

<sup>19</sup> Lynn, *Where is Juliet Stuart Poyntz?*, 144-48.

<sup>20</sup> George E. Sokolsky, “These Days: Who Makes Our Policy?,” *Evening News*, February 16, 1949, 22.

<sup>21</sup> “Miss Bentley Appeals for All Reds to Talk,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, August 18, 1948.

<sup>22</sup> Lynn, *Where is Juliet Stuart Poyntz?*, 143.

<sup>23</sup> Olmstead, *Red Spy Queen*, 168.

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Bentley, *Out of Bondage*, (Muriwai Books, 2018), 195.

mention Bentley's ancestors fighting in the American Revolution, and her specific relation to Founding Father Roger Sherman.<sup>25</sup> This claim is verifiably false.<sup>26</sup>

The primary victim of Bentley's atrocious dialogue is Juliet Stuart Poyntz. Poyntz, a prominent communist spy who vanished (and was possibly murdered) in 1938, worked with Bentley in the underground under the pseudonym "Juliet Glazer." Bentley constantly puts words in the mouth of Poyntz in order to implicitly assert her own moral virtuosity. In *Out of Bondage*, Poyntz criticizes Bentley for being too pure, for being a "Puritan" who refuses to drink or have sex. In their last exchange in the book, Bentley turns down a job offer and Poyntz lashes out in a monologue about how annoyed she is with Bentley's worldview, "Well, the little puritan again! The little girl who doesn't like to drink, who is shocked at my stories about underground life in Europe, who nobly turns down my offer of money. Why don't you grow up?... You, with your bourgeois ideas of getting married and raising a brood of children."<sup>27</sup> These are, of course, projections on the part of Bentley. There is no evidence that these conversations took place. They did perform a useful function for Bentley, however, who could conjure dialogue with Poyntz, now dead, to further her image as a forgivable, traditional American woman.<sup>28</sup>

What is perhaps more interesting is the dialogue that Bentley decides to omit from her telling of the story. *Out of Bondage* is thoroughly saturated with characters who all have myriad things to say and plenty of pages to say it, and yet key voices are left out. *Out of Bondage* includes dozens of communist characters like Lee Fuhr and Poyntz, but zero capitalists. Capitalist, or at the very least non-communist, characters would have enabled the story to focus on the ideological conflict within Bentley and allowed for the book to delve more deeply into the motivations that factor into her decision to spy. Therefore, the omission of capitalist voices from the book closes off the possibility of *Out of Bondage* featuring these discussions entirely.

Before delving headlong into this oddity, it is critical to examine the exigence under which Bentley wrote. The 1950s was arguably a grim time for feminism in the United States. Following the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, the women's rights movement in the United States floundered.<sup>29</sup> Simply put, there was a lack of cohesive feminist activism in the 20s, 30s, and 40s as existed in the early twentieth century.<sup>30</sup> By 1951, social norms and stereotypes regarding gender and the nuclear family were firmly entrenched within American society. This meant that women who chose to leave the home and embrace communism had doubly sinned for their ideological deviance and their movement away from the familial, gendered ideal of 1950s femininity. This presented some unfortunate hurdles for Elizabeth Bentley after she defected from her work as a communist and sought re-entry into mainstream American culture.

Bentley and women like her also faced the stereotypes associated with female communists that pervaded contemporary American media in the 1950s. The preconceptions many Americans had towards female communists have their origin in American film. The "femme fatale" stock character rose to prominence during the late 1930s and early 1940s as female characters took a more active role in plot

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<sup>25</sup> Bentley, *Out of Bondage*, 357.

<sup>26</sup> Olmstead, *Red Spy Queen*, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Bentley, *Out of Bondage*, 692.

<sup>28</sup> Lynn, *Where is Juliet Stuart Poyntz?*, 151-54.

<sup>29</sup> Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 2.

<sup>30</sup> Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 1-3.

development than their 20s counterparts.<sup>31</sup> These women were cold, calculating seductresses that took men in and either fell hopelessly in love with them, or ruined their lives.<sup>32</sup> The entangling of this cliché with communism occurred almost immediately after the outset of the Cold War. The 1949 film, *Red Menace*, features a sexy, dangerous woman that attempts to seduce the protagonist into working for the Soviets. In it, a GI veteran is almost brought to ruin by a communist “femme fatale” as she gets him unwittingly involved with an unabashedly evil branch of an American communist organization.<sup>33</sup>

These perceptions of female communists soon hopped their way off the big screen and into the collective American imagination. Newspapers hawked stories of the Soviet Union employing young, attractive women to lure good American men from their wives and country. These stories would occasionally focus on soldiers fleeing to Moscow to marry their seductresses.<sup>34</sup> American female communists received similar treatment to those beckoning soldiers across the Iron Curtain. Ethel Rosenberg and Priscilla Hiss were two prominent contemporary female communists. Rosenberg and her husband, Julius Rosenberg, were both convicted of treason and executed for smuggling atomic secrets to the Soviets. Hiss, while never convicted, was constantly battered in the media for allegedly assisting her husband, Alger Hiss, in committing espionage. In both cases, the press characterized them as domineering over their husbands and manipulating them into committing crimes against the state. American newspapers reported on their appearances and sexual relationships alongside the actual poignant information related to communist espionage.<sup>35</sup>

It was exactly these preconceptions that Elizabeth Bentley had to grapple with in her crafting of *Out of Bondage*. The initial treatment of Bentley by the press falls in line with these stereotypes. The New York-based *World-Telegram* was the first newspaper to get ahold of Bentley’s story. The article, “Red Ring Bared by Blonde Queen,” describes her as “striking,” “young,” and “blonde,” and vastly over exaggerates the gravity of her testimony, claiming that it had already led to the arrest of several communist leaders.<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting that Bentley was neither particularly young nor blonde when she testified in 1948, revealing the mistruths presented by the *World-Telegram* article. The disappointed press was quick to switch gears, and newspapers continually reported on her physical attributes throughout the hearing, with one article from Denton-Record Chronicle stating she “looked more like a... schoolmarm than a spy queen.”<sup>37</sup> Even her obituary in 1963 commented on her appearance, reporting that she had, “neither the looks nor the inclination for the traditional role of Mata Hari,” in reference to the World War I era spy-seductress.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies & the American Dream* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1973).

<sup>32</sup> Rosen, *Popcorn Venus*, 224-26.

<sup>33</sup> Director Robert G. Springsteen, *The Red Menace* (1949; Republic Pictures), film. 26:01-33:00.

<sup>34</sup> “Communists used Women to Obtain Hold on Former Red,” *Times*, August 4, 1952, 20; “Lures GI from U.S. Embassy: Russian Mata Hari Seduces Second Yank, Inexperienced Soldier,” *News-Herald*, May 17, 1948, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Olmstead, “Blond Queens, Red Spiders, and Neurotic Old Maids: Gender and Espionage in the Early Cold War.” *Intelligence and National Security* 19, no. 1 (March 2004): 78-94.

<sup>36</sup> Olmstead, *Red Spy Queen*, 125.

<sup>37</sup> NEA Service, “Elizabeth Bentley Looks More Like Schoolmarm She Once Was,” 3.

<sup>38</sup> “Elizabeth Bentley, Witness Against Communists, Dead,” *Rutland Daily Herald*, December 4, 1963, 2.

Moral and physical scrutiny in accordance with existing gendered stereotypes quite literally followed Bentley to the grave.

While these stereotypes were problematic for someone looking to be forgiven by the general public, the prior decade held far more promise. Whereas in the 1940s, communist women were painted to be manipulative, conniving, and dedicated, the 1930s instead showed them as manipulated, helpless, and naive. This was the treatment Juliet Stuart Poyntz received from the US press after her disappearance. She was portrayed as an “intensely feminine” girl who had been brutally murdered by communist men after getting in over her head.<sup>39</sup> Poyntz, despite being a committed and lifelong Marxist who came from a long line of revolutionaries, was portrayed as a little girl with no agency of her own and was immediately forgiven by the press after her alleged assassination. Perhaps the fact that Poyntz was no longer around to refute such a portrayal helped cement this image of her in the public imagination. Either way, this coverage would have been very favorable for Bentley in 1948.

It is for these reasons that *Out of Bondage* was so carefully constructed to build Bentley up as a virtuous American woman who had been merely manipulated into being a communist agent. She needed to shake off these preconceptions of her being a cold, calculating spy that could never truly be forgiven by the American public.

Before delving further into exactly how Bentley builds this persona, it is important to have a lens through which *Out of Bondage* can be examined more thoroughly. A sensible place to turn for an in-genre comparison is Victor Kravchenko’s *I Chose Freedom*, published in 1946. Kravchenko, a Soviet purchasing agent and diplomat who survived the Great Purge before fleeing to the United States during the Second World War, saw more success in his writing career than Bentley. *I Chose Freedom* differs from *Out of Bondage* in many ways, most notably in its use of dialogue. Much of the autobiographical tale of Kravchenko’s life is portrayed through conversations he has with key figures in his life, and within himself.

Kravchenko does not portray himself as having been duped or drawn in by communism through manipulation or deceit. Instead, the book is riddled with constant conversations of people doubting him. His motives and ideals are challenged by those close to him at key moments in his development. The character of Kravchenko’s father is perhaps the best example of this. Their bond is portrayed as a loving one, and the two are close all the way until Kravchenko flees the Soviet Union. His father is a devout revolutionary and anti-tsarist belonging to no party who regularly challenges Kravchenko on his morals and dedication while affirming that he believes his son is a genuine supporter of Bolshevism.<sup>40</sup> At times, his father vocally challenges the Bolshevik Party and questions their legitimacy and morality. Towards the middle of the book, Kravchenko’s father condemns the party for its treatment of his son. He expresses his abject rage with the fiery words, “The stupidity and bestiality of it! When I was on the barricades and the police arrested me, I alone suffered, but now fathers and sons and wives are held responsible for each other. The Tsarist Okhrana, believe me, was a philanthropic institution compared to the N.K.V.D.”<sup>41</sup> Despite this, Kravchenko remained dedicated to the cause. He is careful in his writing to show the reader how he became a committed communist asset. He was constantly seen studying and debating leftist theory with his friends and fellow workers at the factory and

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<sup>39</sup> Lynn, *Where is Juliet Stuart Poyntz?*, 105-107.

<sup>40</sup> Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom*, 9, 16, 26.

<sup>41</sup> Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom*, 223.



literacy club.<sup>42</sup> When Kravchenko first becomes a believer in communism, it is because he is persuaded of the ideology's merits by a peer in an intellectual discussion. In *I Chose Freedom's* fourth chapter, Kravchenko describes a conversation with a lecturer named Comrade Lazarev, "We talked for hours that night, about books, the party, the future of Russia. My place was with the communist minority who must show the way, Lazarev said, and I ought to join the Comsomols and later the party... I argued with Comrade Lazarev, I said I would think it over, but in fact I agreed with him and had already made up my mind."<sup>43</sup> Here, Kravchenko is unapologetically painting his transition into communist ideology as intellectual and genuine. He became a communist because he believed in the merits of communism after discussing and considering it at length with his peers. He disagrees with his father's ideology not because he is being manipulated or due to his naivete, but due to a genuine enthusiasm for the cause. Kravchenko is, by all accounts, a committed Marxist for the first half of *I Chose Freedom*. Of course, the remainder of the book follows his disillusionment with the Soviet State. The horrors he witnesses during the Holodomor, the Purges, and in the Gulag all cause him to fully abandon communism ideologically and flee to the United States.

What the audience observes over the course of *I Chose Freedom* is a man writing about how he came to change his mind after decades of good faith commitment to an ideology. This is clearly constructed through Kravchenko's interactions with the world around him. He constantly engages in debate with his father and co-workers, internally discussing the value of the system which seems to cause so much suffering around him. There is a mix of both pro and anti-Soviet voices in most every section of the book. This is beneficial to Kravchenko's goal of becoming an anti-communist writer. *I Chose Freedom* makes for a dramatic, engaging read that pulls the reader into the paranoia and stress surrounding the decision to defect. It's no surprise that it was able to sell well, nor is it a surprise that Kravchenko went on to write several more books in the anti-communist genre as the Cold War progressed. *I Chose Freedom* served as a successful launching pad for his career because it was able to outline the interesting and dramatic interplay between loyalty, ideology, and the material reality of an authoritarian state. Without Kravchenko's emphasis on internal conflict and intellectual dialogue, his book would have been a long, dry trudge through the life of a factory manager.

This sort of ideological conflict is not present in *Out of Bondage*. Bentley does use dialogue to tell her story as Kravchenko does, but debate over the ideals she fought for is absent. *Out of Bondage* instead focuses on Bentley's dialogue with exclusively communist figures in her life. Throughout the text, there are pages upon pages of Poyntz demanding she loosen her traditional morals to better fit with party culture. Meanwhile, Jacob Golos is telling her how the will of the party and cause must always take precedence over individual thought.<sup>44</sup> One of Bentley's first exposures to communist ideology in *Out of Bondage* is her interactions with Lee Fuhr, her roommate. Fuhr aggressively asserts the virtues of communism in a conversation with Bentley early on in *Out of Bondage*. She puts intense pressure on Bentley to accept the ideology and join the part. Later becoming almost hostile towards the end of the exchange, she demands that Bentley pick a side: "'Either you believe in communism or you don't,' she said finally, 'and if you do, you have to join us and do something

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<sup>42</sup> Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom*, 30-31.

<sup>43</sup> Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom*, 36.

<sup>44</sup> Bentley, *Out of Bondage*, 666, 1590.

about making it come to pass... you haven't the courage of your convictions.'" <sup>45</sup> This contrasts starkly with Kravchenko's introduction to communism. Whereas he engaged in an intellectual discussion on the subject, Bentley is instead belittled and bullied into coming to her first Communist Party meeting. The only voices Bentley ever hears are those extolling Marxism and encouraging her to stay on with the Soviet cause. Her leftist beliefs are never challenged by anyone, and even her disillusion with the underground comes from a conversation with a communist character. Towards the end of *Out of Bondage*, Bentley is introduced to the head of the Soviet secret police's US operations. This man is portrayed as almost comically pompous, making constant reference to how moronic and incompetent Americans are while badgering Bentley to join him for lavish meals and cigars. At one point, when Bentley warns him not to walk into the street, he responds with "No one can kill me... I'm indestructible."<sup>46</sup> This serves as the final straw for Bentley, as she began to feel she could no longer trust those above her.

This is how *Out of Bondage* tells its story. The conflict between capitalism and communism is not an ideological one as it was for Kravchenko; rather it is interpersonal. Bentley gives fawning descriptions of many of the communists in *Out of Bondage*. Lee Fuhr is described as a practical woman, incapable of daydreaming and a hard worker for a cause.<sup>47</sup> At her first Communist Party meeting, she is surprised at how earnest, hardworking, and intelligent everyone she meets is. She respects their humility and dedication and is sure to describe how they are kind and compassionate, relaying that "As the meeting continued, I found myself increasingly impressed by the discipline of the members. They seem to have reached the stage of impersonality where they could view their own actions with complete detachment, knowing and admitting when they are wrong... I found myself impressed with their grasp of world affairs."<sup>48</sup> Bentley is never swayed ideologically by communism, rather she is swayed interpersonally by individual communists. Given the way Bentley writes about herself, she simply becomes a spy because she enjoys the company of those who recruited her and finds them to be good people with good intentions. Once she came to dislike those around her, finding them poorly motivated and arrogant, she abandons her time as a spy and turns herself in to the FBI.

Bentley rarely makes reference to Marxist ideology, and in fact goes out of her way to assert that she never truly understood it. She claims that, while studying abroad in Italy (where she states her initial exposure to communist ideology occurred), she found herself "floundering hopelessly" with studies into dialectics and wages, and that Marxist Leninism was generally too complex for her to understand.<sup>49</sup> While Bentley occasionally makes claims that poverty is bad and that capitalism may have some flaws, she never truly delves into how she became ideologically convinced of communism. She never studies it or understands it in *Out of Bondage*, and because she portrays no capitalist voices, there is no counter argument to these ideas either. This deprives the character of Elizabeth Bentley of most of her agency. Never does the reader get the impression that she is making these decisions because she thinks that they are morally or ideologically correct, but simply due to social pressures. It makes her a completely unintellectual and borderline apolitical figure. This all helps to build the innocent persona Bentley needed her book to portray.

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<sup>45</sup> Bentley, *Out of Bondage*, 297.

<sup>46</sup> Bentley, *Out of Bondage*, 3399.

<sup>47</sup> Bentley, *Out of Bondage*, 228.

<sup>48</sup> Bentley, *Out of Bondage*, 436.

<sup>49</sup> Bentley, *Out of Bondage*, 889.

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The omission of capitalist characters and ideological discourse is a subtle one, and without a counterexample like *I Chose Freedom*, it is difficult to pick up on at first glance. All the reader sees in *Out of Bondage* is a woman who at all times is being pressured by many to become a communist. Everyone she knows and loves tells her of the evils of capitalism, the humanitarian nature of Marxism, and the just cause of the Soviet project. This is intentional. Bentley cannot debate with others in the book, she cannot study Marx, she cannot believe Leninism to be the way forward, and she cannot be challenged by an opposing viewpoint at any time in *Out of Bondage*. If she did, the reader would have seen her as an intellectual and begun to associate her with the cold, calculating stereotypical female communist of the day. It would have alienated her conservative audience and made her reentry into society all the more difficult due to her being a woman. In contrast, Kravchenko was free to write himself as a challenged intellectual in *I Chose Freedom*. He could write about all the internal struggles, debates, disagreements, and disillusionment that his heart desired. At the end of the day, all he needed to do was denounce communism and affirm his newfound love for America to gain absolution.

Bentley had to exclude all debate and all challenges of communism in order to invoke those 30s ideas of a woman communist being naive and manipulated. She needed to pull upon these older preconceptions to build a more forgivable, less ill-intentioned persona. Elizabeth Bentley, at least the character of Elizabeth Bentley, didn't spy because she thought Marxism was the way forward, or because she believed capitalism had wrought massive destruction upon the working class during the Great Depression. Rather, Elizabeth Bentley spied because people she liked told her too.

As an aside, it is difficult to say what of Bentley's writing and testimony can be considered credible with regards to her personal convictions. Whether Bentley was ever truly a committed communist or capitalist is perhaps impossible to know for certain, as she was a perennial liar who has been shown to willingly paint whatever picture of her political past is necessary to best serve her interests. It is certainly possible that Bentley had no political motivations, and only spied because it allowed her freedom and luxury in her otherwise drab life. Bentley used NKVD funds to go on lavish Caribbean vacations and stay at expensive hotels, but, on the other hand, she refused a pay raise from Golos' boss in 1944 when the Soviets feared they would lose her.<sup>50</sup> Either way, Bentley's true political motivations (if any existed) in her transition from serving the interests of the NKVD to the FBI are unclear.

For all she fought tooth and nail to paint herself in a naïve light, evocative of 30s stereotypes, *Out of Bondage* accomplished little for Bentley. Sales were disappointing and as the 1950s rolled on, she found fewer and fewer opportunities to testify.<sup>51</sup> Lack of sales meant that she had little in the way of income. She became reliant on regular \$50 payments from the FBI, but this proved not enough. Bentley's alcoholism was a constant issue, and when she collided with those two cars ahead of the Rosenberg trial in 1952, she demanded the FBI increase her payments to \$100.<sup>52</sup> Bentley regularly found herself in debt during this period, most notably to a local drugstore. By autumn of 1952, she had become more than \$500 in debt to one drugstore in Connecticut; the FBI promptly paid this for her as well.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Olmstead, *Red Spy Queen*, 38, 69.

<sup>51</sup> Olmstead, *Red Spy Queen*, 173.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas J. McAndrews, "RE: Elizabeth Bentley," Typescript, New Haven FBI Office, September 29, 1952.

<sup>53</sup> Lester O. Gallagher, "RE: Elizabeth Bentley," Typescript, New Haven FBI Office, October 10, 1952.

While Bentley did slowly recover from her alcoholism after this incident and began to get her life under greater control, her financial troubles continued well past 1952. Bentley sought to transition herself out of anti-communism when the dust settled and began to pursue education, as she had dreamed of doing long before her entrance into espionage.<sup>54</sup> This decision was in part due to the press turning on her. Much of Bentley's credibility as an anti-communist voice was robbed from her by the accusations of contemporary anti-communist Henry Matusow. She and Matusow were romantically involved in the early 50s, and he was an abusive partner throughout the relationship.<sup>55</sup> Matusow played a semi-important role in the discrediting of Joseph McCarthy, as his testimony was often verifiably false. Matusow ended up spending three years in prison for perjury and hurled accusations against Bentley for lying on the stand just as he admitted to lying on the stand. These accusations, while they caused Bentley a large amount of personal stress and represented a significant threat to the anti-communist apparatus of the FBI, never landed Bentley in jail.<sup>56</sup> They did, however, severely undermine the public's confidence in anti-communist testimony in such a way that would prevent Bentley from staying relevant and continuing a career in anti-communism.<sup>57</sup>

Missing her primary source of income, Bentley sought employment in women's education, particularly Catholic women's education. Her job search was, like most things in her life, intensely difficult. Despite finding work at several institutions, her students would invariably discover her past as a communist spy and angry parents or administrators saw her ousted from teaching. Eventually, Bentley settled into work at a penal school for girls in 1959, a job she obtained with the FBI's help.<sup>58</sup>

Bentley was able to keep this job despite several attempts by the administration to remove her. She spent her final years fighting to keep the job and attempting to reconnect with some of the friends she had lost during her time as an FBI informant. These attempts, while initially successful, were too little and too late. Bentley did not live to see them bear fruit. On December 3, 1963, Elizabeth Bentley died of abdominal cancer. The illness is often associated with severe alcoholism. With few remaining friends at the end, her funeral was poorly attended.<sup>59</sup>

Elizabeth Bentley jumped many hurdles throughout her life as both an agent of the Soviet Union, and as one of the first prominent anti-communists of the postwar period. Many of these difficulties were spawned explicitly by her gender, and the preconceptions held by many Americans of the time forced her to paint herself as a bland, naive nobody. She spent her life unable to express herself in any real capacity. She shed every real friend she had by turning on the CPUSA underground and found that many of her new friends in the anti-communist circuit were fair weather at best, and abusive at worst. This inability to express the struggles and outrages of working for the NKVD is most loudly and clearly screamed through the omissions of *Out of Bondage*. One can almost read the frustration as Elizabeth Bentley cannot, under any

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<sup>54</sup> Lester O. Gallagher, "RE: Elizabeth Bentley," Typescript, New Haven FBI Office, October 29, 1952.

<sup>55</sup> James J. Kelly, "Letter to United States Attorney, Southern District of New York," February 3, 1955.

<sup>56</sup> New York Special Agent in Charge, "Unknown Subjects, Henry Marshal Matusow, Subornation of Perjury; Perjury; Obstruction of Justice," Typescript, March 24, 1955.

<sup>57</sup> James Marlow, "The World Today." *Stockton Evening and Sunday Record*, February 8, 1955, 30.

<sup>58</sup> Olmstead, *Red Spy Queen*, 196-200.

<sup>59</sup> Olmstead, *Red Spy Queen*, 2202.

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circumstances, show her true self. There is no way to know if she suffered an intense personal struggle between the merits of communism and capitalism, no way to know what her thoughts of Marxism truly were, not one credible line written on how she felt betraying dozens of her friends and coworkers. Elizabeth Bentley could not write about herself, and instead put this strange, unthinking simulacrum to print. While Kravchenko could write a tome telling the world why he did what he did, and how crushing the revelations of his wrongdoing were, Elizabeth Bentley got no such catharsis. Elizabeth Bentley died without being heard.

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