

**Operation Whisper: The Capture of Soviet Spies Morris and Lona Cohen. By Barnes Carr. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2016.**

Edward J. Hagerty Ph.D.  
*American Public University System*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss>  
pp. 133-135

---

**Recommended Citation**

Hagerty, Edward J. Ph.D.. "Operation Whisper: The Capture of Soviet Spies Morris and Lona Cohen. By Barnes Carr. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2016.." *Journal of Strategic Security* 9, no. 4 (2016) : 133-135.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.9.4.1574>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol9/iss4/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Strategic Security by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@usf.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@usf.edu).

---

**Operation Whisper: The Capture of Soviet Spies Morris and Lona Cohen. By Barnes Carr. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2016.**

***Operation Whisper: The Capture of Soviet Spies Morris and Lona Cohen.* By Barnes Carr. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2016. ISBN 978-1-61168-809-2. Photographs. Notes. Sources cited. Index. Pp. xi, 320. \$29.95.**

Unlike their more famous contemporaries Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, the spy team of Morris and Lona Cohen managed to avoid exposure for many years despite carrying on espionage activities that were in the end even more damaging than those of the Rosenbergs, whose actions led to a date with the electric chair in Sing-Sing. Journalist Barnes Carr attempts to bring the Cohens back into the spotlight and out of the shadowy world they inhabited for so long. In that he is largely successful, but for those in the intelligence field the Cohens' tale is also useful on a number of professional levels, not least of which is that it raises questions about the approaches and methods of counterintelligence efforts and causes one to reexamine whether today's professionals have neglected to heed Santayana's warning about failing to learn from history. Thus, while the story is an interesting one in and of itself, the context of how they were able to operate for so long without detection is really the element that is of more interest.

In the end, we are left with the unfortunate conclusion that despite great efforts by both American and British intelligence and law enforcement agencies to deny unauthorized access to national security secrets, a certain level of ineptitude has traditionally characterized those efforts. It is worth learning about that in an effort not to repeat it. Likewise, it is worth learning of the mistakes made by the Cohens and others. They avoided capture for a long time, but in the end they were compelled to flee precipitously while others in their network were wrapped up, and they were eventually brought to heel. The sequence of events by which that occurred is also a valuable set of lessons. The arts of spying and of catching spies are difficult ones, and it does no one any good to forget the basics of tradecraft, no matter how old it is.

Born in New York City, Morris Cohen played college football and worked summers at Jewish resorts in the Catskills while developing simultaneous skills as a political agitator and budding member of the Communist Party. Eventually Morris was recruited to fight with Loyalist forces during the Spanish Civil War where he was later identified by the Soviets as a potential spy in America. His recruiter noted that Morris' ideological embrace of communism made him an ideal recruit. Morris did return to America where he distanced himself from any involvement in Communist Party activity or anything else that might have brought him to the FBI's attention. Oddly, he

was given a job at the Soviet pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair until he was finally activated as an illegal operative in the U. S. He and the free-spirited fellow communist Lona Petka married in 1941, and though at first appalled by the revelation that Morris was a spy, Lona quickly embraced the opportunity to create both a "love marriage and a spy marriage" (123). Ultimately, her accomplishments in securing nuclear secrets while Morris was serving in the Army during World War II outstripped his contributions to Soviet intelligence, but they were to make a formidable team once reunited.

The collapse of the spy network that led to the eventual execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg caused the Cohens to flee the U.S. in 1950, first to Poland and then to England where they were reestablished as second-hand booksellers and became an important component of a Soviet spy network once again targeting nuclear secrets. The charade lasted until early 1961, when Operation Whisper concluded with the arrests of the Cohens and the network they were part of. Their true identities were soon discovered, and the revelation that two of the most wanted nuclear spies had been captured was more sensational than the guilty verdicts in their trials. Sentenced to twenty years imprisonment, the Cohens were exchanged in 1969 for a British lecturer who had been arrested by the KGB in 1965. They were returned to Poland, finally relocating to Moscow where they spent the remainder of their days.

For years the Cohen's agonized over whether their actions could be construed as traitorous, and undoubtedly using the same flawed logic that set them on the path to betrayal in the first place, they finally seem to have convinced themselves that they acted in a way that was both fair and not especially harmful to the U. S. "No American soldier died because of what I have done," Lona asserted in her old age (289). Those of us who might harbor sentiments less forgiving would be pleased to know that the Cohen's sojourn in Poland and the Soviet Union left them disenchanted with the communist way of life. Morris admitted that life in the USSR had been hard and that there was "a great deal that we did not know about deeply," while Lona once denounced the system more emphatically as "outright totalitarianism" (288). Although they made great personal sacrifices in separating themselves from family and friends, it is difficult to sympathize with them or to see them as anything but traitors to their country. They were never satisfactorily punished for their reprehensible actions, but it might be some small measure of consolation to know they went to their graves unhappy and disillusioned with the very system they had sacrificed so much for.

Carr's book provides an interesting portrait of the Cohens, and, one may suppose, owing to some scarcity of details about their lives, he also provides sometimes extensive information about others whose back story is often relevant to the tale. In some places Carr finds it necessary to resort to some broad generalizations in order to flesh out his story, but it is always interesting if perhaps overly lengthy at times given the direct relevance to the story of the Cohens. Still, one may argue that such context is an important part of the work, and the book is, after all, about far more than just the capture of the Cohens, as the sub-title might incorrectly imply. Otherwise my only criticism of the book is the fact that Carr skimps on documentation and thus too frequently leaves one wondering where specific information came from. The notes, when present, are useful and well done. There simply aren't enough of them by reasonable academic standards. Overall, however, the book will be of interest to students and professionals alike, particularly since the Cohen's story is almost unknown to a broad audience. On that basis it is a good addition to the literature in this field.

*Edward J. Hagerty, Ph.D., American Public University System*