

# The “SOLO” File: “The FBI’s Most Valued Secret Agents of the Cold War”

Morris Childs Talked to Mao, Khrushchev, Suslov, Ponomarev - Carried Soviet Funds for American Communists (with Brother Jack)

By [The National Security Archive](#)

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New book, Enemies: A History of the FBI, by Tim Weiner, first to draw on SOLO files

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Washington, D.C., April 10, 2012 – The “FBI’s most valued secret agents of the Cold War,” brothers Morris and Jack Childs, together codenamed SOLO, reported back to J. Edgar Hoover starting in 1958 about face-to-face meetings with top Soviet and Chinese Communist leaders including Mao and Khrushchev, while couriering Soviet funds for the American Communist Party, according to newly declassified FBI files cited in the new book by Tim Weiner, Enemies: A History of the FBI (New York: Random House, 2012).

Highlights from the massive SOLO files (which total more than 6,941 pages in 45 volumes declassified in August 2011 and January 2012) appear on the National Security Archive’s Web site today at [www.nsarchive.org](http://www.nsarchive.org), together with an overview by Tim Weiner and a new search function, powered by the Archive’s partnership with DocumentCloud, that enables full-text search of the entire SOLO file (instead of the 45 separate PDF searches required by the FBI’s Vault publication at <http://vault.fbi.gov/solo>).

For more on Enemies, see last night’s broadcast of The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, featuring Tim Weiner, and the reviews by [The New York Times Book Review](#), [The Guardian](#), and [The Washington Post](#).

“SOLO” BY TIM WEINER

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s most valued secret agent was a naturalized citizen of Russian/Ukrainian/Jewish origins named Morris Childs. He was the first and perhaps the only American spy to penetrate the Soviet Union and Communist China at the highest levels during the Cold War, including having face-to-face conversations with Nikita Khrushchev, Mao Zedong and others in a red-ribbon cast of Communist leaders.

The operation, codenamed SOLO, that the FBI built on his work (and that of his brother,

Jack) posed great risks and the promise of greater rewards. The FBI's first debriefings of Morris Childs were declassified in August 2011 in time for inclusion in the book *Enemies*. Even more SOLO debriefings and associated memos – upwards of 45 volumes and thousands of pages – emerged in January 2012.

Researchers have been requesting these documents for years, and with good reason. They are unique records of a crucial chapter in the history of American intelligence. They illuminate several mysteries of the Cold War, including the origins of Hoover's hatred for Martin Luther King, some convincing reasons for Dwight Eisenhower's decision to hold off on the CIA's plans to invade Fidel Castro's Cuba, and the beginnings of Richard Nixon's thoughts about a détente with the Soviets.

Morris Childs was an important figure in the Communist Party of the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, serving as the editor of its newspaper, the *Daily Worker*. He and his brother Jack had fallen out with the Party in 1948. Three years later, the FBI approached him as part of a new program called TOPLEV, in which FBI agents tried to talk top-level Communist Party members and officials into becoming informants.

Childs became a Communist for the FBI. He rejoined the Party and rose higher and higher in its secret hierarchy. In the summer of 1957, the Party's leaders proposed that he serve as their international emissary in an effort to reestablish direct political and financial ties with the Kremlin. If Moscow approved, Childs would be reporting to Hoover as the foreign secretary of the Communist Party of the United States.

The FBI's intelligence chief, Al Belmont, could barely contain his excitement over Childs' cooperation. If the operation succeeded, he told Hoover, "it would enhance tremendously the Bureau's prestige as an intelligence agency."

[See [Document 1](#): Memorandum from A.H. Belmont to L.V. Boardman, "Courier System Between Communist Party, USA, and Communist Party, Soviet Union," 30 August 1957. Source: <http://vault.fbi.gov/solo/solo-part-01-of/view>, page 17.]

On March 5, 1958, the FBI's top intelligence officials agreed that the operation would work: the Bureau could "guide one of our informants into the position of being selected by the CPUSA as a courier between the Party in this country and the Soviet Union."

[See [Document 2](#): Memorandum from A.H. Belmont to L.V. Boardman, "Communist Party, USA, International Relations, Internal Security-C," 5 March 1958. Source: <http://vault.fbi.gov/solo/solo-part-01-of/view>, page 1.]

On April 24, 1958, Childs boarded TWA Flight 824 to Paris, on the first leg of his long trip to Moscow, at the invitation of the Kremlin. He met the Party's leaders over the course of eight weeks. He learned that his next stop would be Beijing. On July 6, 1958, he had an audience with Chairman Mao Zedong (see pages 13-16 of Document 3B) Was the United States planning to go to war in Southeast Asia? Mao asked. If so, China intended to fight to the death, as it had during the Korean War. "There may be many Koreas in Asia," Mao predicted.

[See Documents 3A-B: [A](#): Childs' Account of his April 1958 Trip to Soviet Union and China. [B](#): SAC, New York, to Director, FBI, 23 July 1958 [account of Child's first trip as a double-agent] Source: <http://vault.fbi.gov/solo/solo-part-02-of/view>.]

Returning to Moscow that summer, conferring with leaders of the Party and the KGB, Morris received a formal invitation to attend the 21st Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and he accepted promises of cash payments for the CPUSA that would come to \$348,385 over the next few months. The money was delivered to Morris by a Soviet delegate to the United Nations at a restaurant in Queens, New York.

Though the trips exhausted him, leaving him a physically broken man, Morris Childs went abroad two or three times a year over the course of the next two decades. He undertook fifty- two international missions, befriending the world's most powerful Communists. He controlled the income of the American Communist Party's treasury and contributed to the formulation of its foreign policy. His work as SOLO was undetected by the KGB and kept secret from all but the most powerful American leaders.

[See [Document 4](#): Clyde Tolson to the Director, 12 March 1959 [report on Child's background, how he was recruited, and information from his most recent trip to Moscow] Source: <http://vault.fbi.gov/solo/solo-part-11-of-17/view>, p. 49.]

SOLO's intelligence gave Hoover an unquestioned authority in the White House. The United States never had had a spy inside the high councils of the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China. Morris Childs would provide the U.S. government with insights no president had ever before possessed.

Hoover briefed President Eisenhower about the SOLO mission repeatedly from November 1958 onwards. For the next two years, Hoover sent summaries of his reporting directly to Eisenhower and Vice President Nixon. Hoover reported that the world's most powerful Communists- Mao Zedong and Nikita Khrushchev- were at each other's throats. The breach between Moscow and Beijing was a revelation to Eisenhower. The FBI director also reported that Moscow wanted the CPUSA to support the civil rights movement in the United States. The idea that communism and civil rights were connected through covert operations was electrifying to Hoover.

Hoover told the White House that SOLO had met with Anibal Escalante, a political leader of the newly victorious revolution in Cuba, a confidant to Fidel Castro and the Cuban Communist most highly regarded in Moscow. Escalante said that the Cubans knew the United States was planning a paramilitary attack to overthrow Castro. This reporting gave Eisenhower pause as he weighed the CIA's proposal to invade the island with a force of anti-Castro Cubans undergoing training in Guatemala. He never approved the plan; that was left to President Kennedy, who went ahead with the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion.

[See [Document 5](#): Memoranda and Letters to Director/Naval Intelligence, Director/CIA, National Security Adviser, Secretary of State, and Vice President Nixon on Information from Anibal Escalante. Source: <http://vault.fbi.gov/solo/solo-part-21-22-of/view>]

Hoover reported directly to Nixon as the vice president prepared to go to Moscow in July 1959, where he would engage Khrushchev in a public discussion on the political and cultural merits of communism and capitalism. SOLO had met with the top Communist Party officials responsible for American affairs. Hoover distilled their thinking about the leading candidates in the 1960 presidential election.

Moscow liked Ike: he understood the meaning of war and he was willing to risk the chances of peace. But Senator Kennedy was judged as "inexperienced" and potentially dangerous.

As for Nixon, the Communists thought he would be a capable president, though he was “cunning” and “ambitious.”

[See [Document 6](#): SAC, New York, to Director, FBI, 13 March 1960 [report on Khrushchev’s imminent visit to France and on President Eisenhower’s prospective (later cancelled) trip to Soviet Union]. Source: <http://vault.fbi.gov/solo/solo-part-19-20-of/view>, pp. 93-98.]

Nixon learned from the SOLO debriefings that Moscow could conduct rational political discourse; a decade later, the lesson served him well as president when he sought détente with the Soviets.

[Adapted from Tim Weiner, *Enemies: A History of the FBI*, pp. 207-209]

## MORE ABOUT SOLO

The SOLO records are an extraordinary new contribution to the history of the FBI and American intelligence. It is worth noting that prior to the new FBI releases, earlier scholars had made important contributions to knowledge of this FBI operation. Civil rights historian and assiduous FOIA requester David J. Garrow was the first researcher to discover the role of the Childs brothers as FBI double-agents. In his book, *Martin Luther King and the FBI: from ‘Solo’ to Memphis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), Garrow sought to explain why J. Edgar Hoover and the Bureau were such “viciously negative” opponents of King. Garrow disclosed that the Childs brothers had provided information to the FBI on Stanley Levison, one of King’s key political advisers. Levison had been active in the U.S. Communist Party during the early 1950s but, as Childs reported, had left the organization because of its political irrelevance. Nevertheless, the FBI saw Levison as a Soviet agent and used his former political connections as leverage to force King to break with his adviser.

Following Garrow’s trail was the late John Barron, a former Naval intelligence officer turned journalist and later a full-time writer for *Readers Digest* who produced as full an account of “Operation Solo” as was possible in the 1990s. An expert on the KGB, Barron met numerous former Soviet agents. One day, Morris Childs and his wife turned up at Barron’s Washington, D.C. office. Recognizing the Childs’ importance, Barron wanted to tell Morris’ story and did so through interviews with the FBI case officers who had handled contacts with the Childs brothers and their associates. Barron had no access to the documents, but his book, *Operation Solo: The FBI’s Man in the Kremlin* (Regnery, 1996), provided the first detailed account of the rise of Morris Childs to an influential role in the U.S. Communist Party, why he secretly broke with the Party, when and how he started to work with the FBI, and how he used his party connections and recurrent travel to Moscow and Beijing to provide current intelligence on developments in those capitals.

– William Burr

## THE DOCUMENTS

Archive staff have downloaded the SOLO files from the FBI site and launched them in [DocumentCloud](#) in order to get a higher-quality full-text (OCR) and keyword search capacity down to the individual page level. The following files correspond to the 45 volumes posted on the FBI’s Vault. To search the entire group, enter terms in the field below and press “Enter.” The results will take you to the correct volume. Repeat your search and the results will take you to the correct page with the term highlighted in yellow.

[Click here](#) to access the SOLO Documents

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