

By JACKSON LEARS Published: June 30, 2009 The New York Times

At his death at age 81 in 1989, I. F. Stone was a revered sage, the subject of tributes in Time magazine and The Wall Street Journal. The scrappy left-wing pamphleteer had won late-life fame as a reporter who turned his deafness to advantage by relying on written sources rather than privileged access. But in recent years Stone has become controversial again, owing to allegations that he was a longtime apologist for the Soviet Union who collaborated with Soviet intelligence during the 1930s and '40s.

“American Radical,” D. D. Guttenplan’s admiring but not uncritical biography, has been nearly 20 years in the making. Guttenplan, a London correspondent for The Nation, draws on scores of interviews as well as broad and deep research in published and archival sources — including recently declassified United States government archives — to place Stone within the crowded canvas of American political history from the Great Depression to the Age of Reagan. The result is a narrative that captures Stone’s full significance as an investigative reporter, radical democrat and self-made Jewish intellectual. It makes a strong case for Stone’s continuing relevance to our own time.

Born Isidore Feinstein in Philadelphia in 1907, the oldest son of a dry-goods merchant, Stone grew up a secular Jew and bohemian radical. Under the wing of David Stern, who owned The Philadelphia Record and later The New York Post, Feinstein honed his skills in the bleak atmosphere of the Great Depression. With capitalism in ruins, he was attracted to Soviet communism but suspicious of the show trials Stalin used to justify the murder of his opponents. Still, like many others on the left in the 1930s, Feinstein believed the Soviet Union could be a powerful ally in a Popular Front against fascism. He became “an enthusiastic fellow traveler,” in Guttenplan’s words, “willing to trade a certain ideological forbearance for the stamina and organizational know-how Communist Party comrades brought to the battles for industrial democracy and racial equality.”

His forbearance may have led him to further accommodations. Another new book, “Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America,” by the American historians John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr and the Russian journalist Alexander Vassiliev, adduces evidence, challenged by Guttenplan, that Stone “worked closely with the K.G.B.” in 1936-38. In any case, Stone had begun to rethink his views of the Soviet Union and by the time of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, in 1939, had already been “left homeless by the disintegration of the Popular Front,” Guttenplan writes.

By this time he had changed his name from Feinstein to Stone — a career move common among Jews of the period, though Stone also “saw the change as ‘protection for his children,’ ” Guttenplan notes.

When he was sidelined by The Post, the result of widening political disagreements with the more conservative Stern, Stone landed on his feet at The Nation, The New Republic and PM, the short-lived left-wing daily published in the 1940s.

After Pearl Harbor, Stone enjoyed a few years of comparative respectability, but found himself denounced in Congress as subversive during the postwar Red scare. Stone was certainly on the left, but he was not doctrinaire. “I can’t help cheering for Tito” — the Yugoslav leader who broke with Moscow — Stone wrote in 1948. Dismayed by the coming of the cold war, he opposed NATO but also saw no grounds for hope in the Soviet Union, where Stalin had unleashed “an old-fashioned Russian orgy of suspicion of foreigners, intellectuals and any kind of dissent.” When the Korean War broke out in 1950, Stone was skeptical of American denunciations of Communist aggression. But he did not claim — as his detractors have charged — that the South Koreans solely instigated the war. In his book “The Hidden History of the Korean War,” published in 1952, he described provocations by both sides. “Certainly he underestimated the degree of coordination between Kim Il Sung’s North Korean regime and Stalin,” Guttenplan

concludes, though he notes that a contemporary like Murray Kempton later observed that Stone's "analysis of the progress of the war was impeccable."

But the book made Stone a pariah. So did his avowedly leftist views, which aroused the suspicion of the F.B.I. He was barred from renewing his passport, was placed under surveillance for more than a year, and in 1952 was "effectively blacklisted as a reporter," Guttenplan writes — kept out of the pages of even *The Nation*.

He had entered "a kind of internal exile," Guttenplan writes, parked in a rented Washington office, "waiting for the phone to ring." But then, in 1953, he started his own newspaper, *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, with little capital besides a list of 10,000 subscribers to a defunct left-wing magazine. One of the pleasures of Guttenplan's biography is watching Stone stage his comeback. The changing zeitgeist helped. During the later 1950s, anonymous informers gradually fell out of fashion. So did investigations into "un-American activities." On the left, old Communists shuffled off the stage, replaced by younger, less dogmatic activists in organizations like Women Strike for Peace and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. "They are the stuff of saints," Stone wrote of SNCC. "I regard them with reverence." By the mid-1960s, the *Weekly's* circulation was soaring, and Stone had become a popular figure at rallies against the Vietnam War — a radical free of sectarian rant. He even recovered his hearing, after two operations. In November 1967 he appeared on NBC's "Today" show, chatting amiably with Hugh Downs. It had been 18 years since his last appearance on television.

But if the cultural cold war was winding down, its geopolitical premises still guided the American war in Vietnam. Stone had been hammering away at them for years. In 1964, when the Johnson administration reported that North Vietnamese gunboats had attacked American destroyers on two separate occasions in the Gulf of Tonkin, Stone raised the possibility that the first attack had been provoked by months of secret American counterinsurgency warfare, and that the second had not occurred. He was right.

He was also right to reject the counterinsurgency vogue that enveloped the White House in the early 1960s. He recognized it as the same approach that had already failed the French in Algeria and Indochina, not to mention the hapless Cubans wading ashore from the Bay of Pigs. And he was an insightful commentator on the Arab-Israeli conflict. As a boy, Isidore Feinstein had endured the slights and injuries of anti-Semitism in Haddonfield, N.J., and at the University of Pennsylvania. He was acutely (and despite his name change, proudly) aware of his Jewishness. He had rebuked the American government for turning away Jewish refugees during World War II and accompanied a boatload of illegal Jewish immigrants to Palestine in 1946. "In Palestine a Jew can be a Jew," he wrote exultantly. But he also noticed the Arabs: "Palestine is their home. They love their country. Any equitable and lasting solution of the Palestine problem must take these Arabs and their feelings into account." This was Stone's constant concern, even as he celebrated Israel. For decades he envisioned a binational state as the best way of resolving the tragic conflict of claims on the land. "The essence of tragedy," he wrote in *The New York Review of Books* after the 1967 war, "is a struggle of right against right. . . . In a tragic struggle, the victors become the guilty and must make amends to the defeated."

By the 1970s, Stone seemed to be everywhere, delivering commencement addresses, accepting honorary degrees and appearing on "The Dick Cavett Show." He continued to challenge cold war premises even as he exposed Soviet abuses. His last major project, his book "The Trial of Socrates," published in 1988, was a vigorous effort to reconcile free speech and democracy. It was also a fitting coda to the career of an unrepentant radical.

Jackson Lears is the editor of *Raritan* and the author, most recently, of "Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920."