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## de Toledano and Lasky: SEEDS OF TREASON

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## RECENT BOOKS

This department undertakes to note or review briefly current books on law and matters closely related thereto. Periodicals, court reports, and other publications that appear at frequent intervals are not included. The information given in the notes is derived from inspection of the books, publishers' literature, and the ordinary library sources.

## BRIEF REVIEWS

**SEEDS OF TREASON.** By *Ralph de Toledano* and *Victor Lasky*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls. 1950. Pp. ix, 270. \$3.50.

The goal of this book, according to its preface, is to knit into a coherent account the loose threads of the Whittaker Chambers-Alger Hiss case. The newspapermen authors feel that "the one-dimensional reporting of a daily paper and the two-dimensional recapitulation of a news magazine cease to be effective in what is fundamentally a four-dimensional, organic phenomenon." Unfortunately, what begins as a conscientiously objective analysis of one of the most puzzling and confusing stories of our time soon turns into an *apologia* for Chambers and a general attack on the laxity of governmental security precautions. Readers seeking clarity are not likely to find it in this account and the shortcoming cannot be excused with the explanation, offered by the authors, that Chambers willingly told them his story, while Hiss, or his attorneys, were close-mouthed and hostile. Perhaps the most worth-while chapters in this book are those in which Toledano and Lasky trace the early histories of Chambers and Hiss and seek to find the influences that were to draw the two men into what one of them called "the tragedy of history." In the case of Chambers, the task was simple. Moody, introspective, and non-conforming as a child, the young Chambers sought for a sense of direction and a scale of values in devastated, post World War I Europe. Such paranoid cities as Berlin, in the summer of 1923, were not the place to find them. Chambers returned to the United States determined to do something for crucified mankind, and Marxism seemed to offer a ready panacea. When the spotlight shifts to Hiss, however, explanations are not so easy. Remarkably successful, socially and academically, as a Johns Hopkins undergraduate, Hiss went on to a distinguished three years at Harvard Law School. He served as legal secretary to Justice Holmes and settled down to work for the conservative Boston law firm of Choate, Hall & Stewart. Hardly the pattern for a revolutionary, yet, somewhere along the line, a jury indirectly found, Hiss joined a Communist cell and became active in espionage activities. The authors can find an explanation only in Hiss' associations in Washington of the 1930's and in the idealistic socialism of his wife, Priscilla. The second part of this narrative describes the various Washington spy rings, a story largely familiar to readers of the Elizabeth Bentley-Julian Wadleigh exposés, and draws Hiss and Chambers together. The concluding, and by far the longest, part of the book carries the reader through the hearings before the House Un-American Activities Committee, the grand jury proceedings, and the two perjury trials. Very little is added to the contemporary newspaper

accounts, the authors summarizing the evidence presented by the prosecution and concluding that the second jury reached the only possible result. While most sober and thoughtful Americans will probably agree, it is unfortunate that Toledano and Lasky find it necessary to garnish this account with descriptions of Attorney Stryker as "snarling and shouting," of Judge Kaufman as "visibly impressed" over the fact that Supreme Court Justices Reed and Frankfurter took "a day off from Mt. Olympus" to testify as character witnesses, or of Mrs. Hiss facing the court "like a frightened somnambulist." While such colorful prose may boost book-store sales, and, as William L. White states in a dust-jacket "blurb," may make the book "as exciting as a detective story," it is hardly in keeping with an avowed purpose to disentangle fact from rumor and present a dispassionate biography of an era and a state of mind.