



The Pontecorvo Affair: A Cold War Defection and Nuclear Physics

Simone Turchetti

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In the fall of 1950, newspapers around the world reported that the Italian-born nuclear physicist Bruno Pontecorvo and his family had mysteriously disappeared while returning to Britain from a holiday trip. Because Pontecorvo was known to be an expert working for the UK Atomic Energy Research Establishment, this raised immediate concern for the safety of atomic secrets, especially when it became known in the following months that he had defected to the Soviet Union. Was Pontecorvo a spy? Did he know and pass sensitive information about the bomb to Soviet experts? At the time, nuclear scientists, security personnel, Western government officials, and journalists assessed the case, but their efforts were inconclusive and speculations quickly turned to silence. In the years since, some have downplayed Pontecorvo's knowledge of atomic weaponry, while others have claimed him as part of a spy ring that infiltrated the Manhattan Project.

The Pontecorvo Affair draws from newly disclosed sources to challenge previous attempts to solve the case, offering a balanced and well-documented account of Pontecorvo, his activities, and his possible motivations for defecting. Along the way, Simone Turchetti reconsiders the place of nuclear physics and nuclear physicists in the twentieth century and reveals that as the discipline's promise of military and industrial uses came to the fore, so did the enforcement of new secrecy provisions on the few experts in the world specializing in its application.

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