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# The Venona Project and Cold War Espionage

On June 19, 1953, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were put to death in the electric chair. Their crime? Conspiracy. Convicted of providing atomic secrets to the Soviet Union, the Rosenbergs were the only people put to death in the United States for espionage during the Cold War. The Rosenberg case illuminates a highly charged debate on recently declassified U. S. government records that bear on the subject of Cold War espionage—the Venona documents. Using these primary sources to introduce students to the general topic of Cold War espionage, and the specific case of the Rosenbergs, provides a fruitful opportunity to address the interpretive nature of history and the evaluation of evidence, in addition to injecting a compelling drama into our narrative of the Cold War.

## Background

One of the most intriguing aspects of the Cold War relationship between the Americans and the Soviets was the development of vast networks of spies and counter spies. Each side used this arena to gather information on its opponent, as well as to spread misinformation. Indeed, the United States went through an era of spy hysteria during the McCarthy era, which turned the Cold War inward. Because of the highly secretive nature of espionage, information about it can be difficult to obtain; however, once the Cold War ended and time passed, new secret documents have come to light.

Of this newly accessible information, one of the most illustrative is a series of documents created by the Venona Project. Released to the public in 1995 by the National Security Agency (NSA), Venona was a top-secret effort to intercept and decrypt messages sent by the Soviet government to spies working in the United States in the 1940s. Under Venona, American and British cryptologists spent two years breaking the Soviet code, and then used this information to document the activity of Soviet spies within the United States. This project was instrumental in the exposure and arrest of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

The story of the Rosenbergs, however, starts with a German-born atomic scientist named Klaus Fuchs. In 1949, Fuchs confessed to steal-

ing atomic secrets and providing them to the Soviet Union. His act of espionage helped the Soviet Union explode its first atomic weapon that same year. At his trial Fuchs could not provide the names of his American contacts, but investigation under the Venona Project revealed that Fuchs had been in contact with David and Ruth Greenglass, both of whom were acting under the direction of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. The Rosenbergs—Communist Party members and members of the International Workers Order—were taken into custody in 1950

and charged with espionage. Although they pleaded not guilty to the charges, three years later Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed. For an excellent online source of information about the case, visit: <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/rosenb/rosenb.htm>.

The Rosenberg case caused great controversy in the 1950s, and it continues to do so today. Was the information gathered enough to convict them of espionage? If they were indeed guilty, was the punishment proportional to the crime? These are questions that can generate excellent discussion among students on both the nature of the trial and the domestic Cold War tensions it reveals. But perhaps more importantly, being able to compare the Venona documents to historical accounts of Cold War

espionage gives students a hands-on chance to understand the interpretive nature of historical research.

## Time Frame

Two to three forty-minute class periods.

## Student Objectives

- To understand the role of espionage in the Cold War.
- To interpret primary source documents.
- To understand the study of history as an evolving practice.
- To compare different interpretations of history.



Figure 1. Klaus Fuchs (1911–1988), at left, was a German-born theoretical physicist and Communist who fled to the United Kingdom to escape Nazi persecution. In 1941, Fuchs began working on the Allied atomic bomb project. After Germany invaded the Soviet Union, he began supplying the USSR information about Allied nuclear research. In 1950, thanks to Soviet messages deciphered by the U.S.–U.K. Venona project, Fuchs was arrested in the U.K., confessed, and was sentenced to fourteen years in prison. His testimony implicated Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in the U.S., who were arrested, tried, and convicted of espionage. They were executed in 1953. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)



~~TOP SECRET~~ [REDACTED] **VENONA**

~~SECRET~~

Reissue (T282)

**From: NEW YORK**

**To: MOSCOW**

**No: 1053**

**26 July 1944**

**To VIKTOR[i].**

In July ANTENNA[ii] was sent by the firm for ten days to work in CARTHAGE [KARFAGEN][iii]. There he visited his school friend Max ELITCHER[a], who works in the Bureau of Standards as head of the fire control section for warships [which mount guns] [b] of over five-inch calibre. He has access to extremely valuable materials on guns.

Five years ago Max ELITCHER [MAKS E.] graduated from the Electro-Technical Department of the City College of NEW YORK. He has a Master of Science degree. Since finishing college he has been working at the Bureau of Standards. He is a FELLOW COUNTRYMAN [ZEMLYAK][iv]. He entered the FELLOW COUNTRYMEN's organization [ZEMLYACHESTVO] after finishing his studies.

By ANTENNA he is characterized as a loyal, reliable, level-headed and able man. Married, his wife is a FELLOW COUNTRYWOMAN [ZEMLYACHKA]. She is a psychologist by profession, she works at the War Department.

Max ELITCHER is an excellent amateur photographer and has all the necessary equipment for taking photographs.

Please check ELITCHER and communicate your consent to his clearance [OFORMLENIE].

No. 594  
26 July

MAJ[v]

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**Notes:** [a] Given in Roman alphabet.  
[b] Inserted by translator.

**Comments:**  
[i] VIKTOR: Lt. Gen. P. M. FITIN.  
[ii] ANTENNA: Julius ROSENBERG.  
[iii] KARFAGEN: WASHINGTON, D. C.  
[iv] ZEMLYAK: Member of the Communist Party.  
[v] MAJ: i.e. MAY, Stepan APRESYAN.

Figure 3. In 1995, the U.S. Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy released the previously classified documents produced by the Venona Project, a decades-long collaboration between the U.S. and U.K. to decrypt messages sent by Soviet intelligence agents during World War II. In this 1944 message to Moscow, a Soviet agent in New York describes a successful effort by Julius Rosenberg (ANTENNA) to recruit U.S. Bureau of Standards employee, and fellow Communist, Max Elitcher to take photographs of classified government information on naval guns. (Courtesy of National Security Agency)

movies, and they most certainly will have a romantic vision of what it is to be a spy. However, the practice of espionage during the Cold War focused much more on the systematic gathering of information and strategic intelligence, rather than the high-speed chases and explosions that often represent espionage on film.

Ask students to consider the following questions:

1. Why do nations spy on each other?
2. Is spying ethical? Can it be justified? It may be helpful to relate the situation to coaches who “spy” on competitors before a big game. Why do they watch the game of a big rival? Why would they watch films of a team they will play? The answer, of course, is to know the opposition and gain an advantage. Is this unfair? Is this unethical?
3. Ask the students to consider the impact of Cold War spies by asking:
  - a. How did these people and events influence the Cold War?
  - b. Did they help keep the balance of power and thus keep peace?
  - c. Was the United States’ treatment of convicted spies justified?

### Day Two

The teacher should briefly communicate what the Venona Project was, its significance, and the current debate surrounding it. This is a great opportunity to discuss the interpretive nature of history, by asking students:

1. How can historians look at the same evidence and come to different conclusions?
2. Which historian seems to make the best argument about the Venona documents, and why? (Consider political motivations, personal biases, and use of evidence.)
3. What is at stake in the debate about Venona? What are the specific implications of historical arguments about the Cold War and communism?

Once students have background information, they should put on the historian’s hat and look at the actual evidence themselves. Typically students show great interest in this part of the lesson, perhaps because they feel as though they are being let in on a secret.

Declassified Venona documents are available at <[http://www.nsa.gov/public\\_info/declass/Venona/index.shtml](http://www.nsa.gov/public_info/declass/Venona/index.shtml)>. The students’ research should be focused on documents from 1944, and they should search for information about Fuchs and the Rosenbergs. Because of the volume of documents available on the NSA site, teachers may want to direct students to specific documents to get them started: good examples include February 9, 1944 release 1 and May 8, 1944 release 1, which both seem to suggest that Fuchs was spying on the American atomic program; and May 22, 1944 release 1, July 26, 1944 release 1, and September 21, 1944 release 1, which deal with spycraft and spy recruitment by the Rosenbergs. It is important that the students read the footnotes which explain the code words used in the documents.

Another resource is the collection of documents at the FBI website, <<http://foia.fbi.gov/foiindex/venona.htm>>. This is a seventy-five page PDF file, excerpts of which can be printed for students. What may also be of interest to students is the CIA’s press release regarding the Venona documents, <<https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/press-release-archive-1995/pr71195.html>>. If students have a difficult time wading through all of the primary source material, they may visit the PBS NOVA website on the Venona documents at <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/venona/>>, which narrows the search down to four documents.

Students should come up with their own interpretations, and evaluate the primary sources themselves. As the students read these primary sources, they should do four things:

1. Establish what the document means.
2. Assess what Fuchs and the Rosenbergs were doing.
3. Establish whether or not the spies in question were doing anything illegal.
4. After examining all of the evidence, students need to consider and discuss the following:
  - a. Did the Rosenbergs pass information to the Soviets?
  - b. What do we make of it if they did? Was it right to put them to death?

### Day Three

Confronted with the documentary evidence as well as conflicting scholarly arguments, students may well be confused. They should be assured that historians not only examine evidence, but also test that evidence against conclusions published in the scholarship. On day three, students can take a step back and make a side-by-side comparison of their textbooks and the evidence presented by the above mentioned books about Venona; and they can compare secondary sources with primary sources they have read.

The class should discuss the interpretive nature of history and decide which historians seem to make a more convincing case regarding the Venona documents. Ask the students to comment on the nature of historical research. They should consider the fluid and changing nature of history as more evidence and different interpretations become available.

As they discuss the role of espionage in the history of the Cold War, ask them if Venona is even mentioned in their textbooks. Much of the historical evidence about Venona was made public in the late 1990s and in 2000. If their textbooks were printed after that time, then Venona should be there, but in many cases it will not be present. The question, of course, is why not? Here is a great opportunity for the teacher to discuss the writing of history and nature of historical research, as well as that of textbooks. Textbooks are painfully slow when it comes to making changes as new historical evidence and arguments are presented.

Ask the students to consider the following questions:

1. Which historical arguments and what evidence is included in their textbooks? What is left out?
2. Why are only some interpretations included? Should all points of view be in a textbooks? Is that possible?

One useful assignment is to present students with nothing but primary sources from multiple perspectives and ask them what issues they would include in a textbook if they were in charge of writing one. Have them consider:

1. Which historical arguments and what evidence is included in their textbooks? What is left out?
2. What would they put in the book? What would they leave out? Why? How do they make that decision?

From personal experience, I can say that students enjoy and appreciate this exercise. Asking them what they would include in a history textbook gives them some ownership over what they are learning and it gives them a feel for trying to achieve balance and objectivity.

### Further Reading

#### Primary Sources

Central Intelligence Agency, *Press Release on Venona Documents* <<https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/press-release-archive-1995/pr71195.html>>, July 11, 1995.

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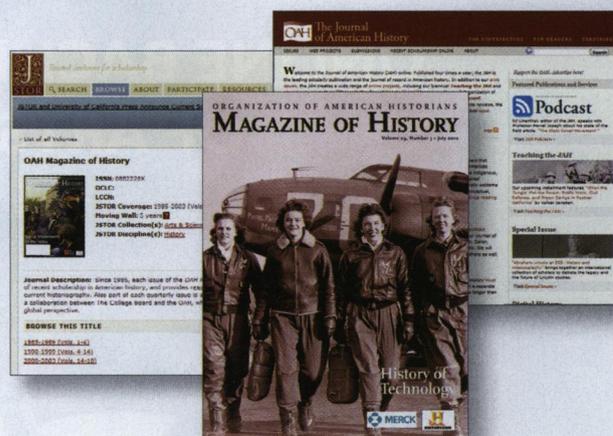
Trahair, Richard. *Encyclopedia of Cold War Espionage, Spies, and Secret Operations*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2004. □

### Endnotes

1. Herbert Romerstein and Eric Breindel, *The Venona Secrets: Exposing Soviet Espionage and America's Traitors* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2000), 451.
2. Romerstein and Breindel go on to emphasize that it was President Truman's Executive Order 9835 which mandated loyalty and security checks, thus barring communists from government employment. Issued in March 1947, the order came three years before McCarthy became famous. *Ibid.*, 454. This information can also be found in *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) and *In Denial: Historians, Communism & Espionage* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003), both by John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr.
3. Ellen Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1998), xvii–xviii.
4. Ellen Schrecker, "Comments on John Earl Haynes', 'The Cold War Debate Continues: A Traditionalist View of Historical Writing on Domestic Communism and Anti-Communism,'" *Journal of Cold War Studies* 2 (Winter 2000): 76–115." Available at: <<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~hpcws/comment15.htm>>.

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