

2000

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### Recommended Citation

Peake, Hayden B. (2000) "The Venona Progeny," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 53 : No. 3 , Article 10.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol53/iss3/10>

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## The Venona Progeny

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Benson, Robert Louis, and Michael Warner, eds. *Venona: Soviet Espionage and the American Response*. Washington, D.C.: National Security Agency and Central Intelligence Agency, 1996. 450pp. \$48.80

Ball, Desmond, and David Horner. *Breaking the Codes: Australia's KGB Network, 1944-1950*. St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1998. 468 pp. \$29.95

West, Nigel. *Venona: The Greatest Secret of the Cold War*. London: HarperCollins, 1999. 384pp. £19.99

Haynes, John Earl, and Harvey Klehr. *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1999. 487pp. \$30

Weinstein, Allen, and Alexander Vassiliev. *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America—The Stalin Era*. New York: Random House, 1999. 402pp. \$30

Albright, Joseph, and Marcia Kunstel. *Bombshell: The Secret Story of America's Unknown Atomic Spy Conspiracy*. New York: Time Books, 1997. 399pp. \$25

Breindel, Eric, and Herbert Romerstein. *The Venona Secrets: The Soviet Union's World War II Espionage Campaign against the United States and How America Fought Back: A Story of Espionage, Counterespionage, and Betrayal*. New York: Basic Books, 1999. 400pp. \$30

**I**N 1939, WHEN THE SOVIET UNION was an ally of Nazi Germany, the U.S. Army began collecting copies of encrypted cables sent commercially to Moscow by the Soviet diplomatic missions in the United States. No effort to decrypt the cables, thought to be diplomatic in nature, was made until 1943, when reports were received that Stalin, by then an ally of the United States, was negotiating a separate peace treaty with Germany. At that time, the Army Signals Security Agency (SSA), an early predecessor of the National Security Agency (NSA),

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was ordered to establish a program—eventually called VENONA—to decipher the cables. The Soviet codes did not yield readily to cryptanalysis, because, as it was soon discovered, a two-part ciphering system had been employed; the second step used a one-time pad—theoretically unbreakable. As it happened, none of the messages was deciphered before the end of the war.

Once progress began to be made, however, the SSA cryptanalysts made a startling discovery. Only slightly more than half of the 750,000 intercepted cables concerned foreign ministry and trade matters; the balance involved Soviet intelligence organizations. By 1946, when the first message was decrypted, KGB, GRU (military intelligence), and naval GRU—user systems had been identified. When the VENONA program ended in October 1980, portions of nearly three thousand of the cables intercepted between 1939 and 1948 had been decrypted. The results revealed that Soviet agents had penetrated every important organization in the American government, including the Manhattan Project. The Allies were not immune; VENONA revealed Soviet penetrations in Britain, Canada, and Australia. In 1995 the VENONA decrypts were declassified. Hard copies were made available to scholars, while digital versions were posted on the NSA Website, together with several monographs providing historical details.

The public reaction to the VENONA decrypts was mixed. Walter and Miriam Schneir, longtime advocates of the “the Rosenbergs are innocent” theory, wrote in the 5 July 1999 issue of *The Nation* that “no reasonable person who examines all the relevant documents can doubt, for example, that in World War II Washington some employees of government agencies were passing information that went to the Russians, that the American Communist Party provided recruits for Soviet intelligence work or that VENONA yielded clues that put

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investigators on the trail of Klaus Fuchs[,] . . . Julius Rosenberg and others." But many still could not accept the charges that Communist Party members had engaged in espionage for the Soviet Union. There were a variety of countercharges. Some claimed that the U.S. government had fabricated the cables. Others argued that the interpretation of the partially decrypted messages was faulty. Still others claimed "Red scare revisionism," coupled with "right-wing triumphalism," aimed at rehabilitating Senator Joseph McCarthy.

The books discussed here consider these issues to varying degrees. They reveal how the codes were broken, who did the work, the nature of the espionage, how the Soviets found out about VENONA (long before the CIA was officially informed by the FBI in 1952), and why most of the spies identified were never prosecuted. While there is some overlap between them, each book contributes its own details and analysis.

Robert Louis Benson is the NSA's point man and institutional memory for VENONA. Michael Warner is a gifted young historian in the CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence. Together they contributed to and edited the first major book on the program, *Venona: Soviet Espionage and the American Response*. It provides a chronology of major events and a concise summary (thirty-three pages) of the program: why it began, why it ended, and what happened in between. Benson and Warner support their analysis with documentary material—some reproduced for the first time—presenting it in two parts. The first part comprises thirty-five documents that reveal the U.S. government's attempts to deal with foreign espionage between 1939 and 1960. The emphasis is on Soviet intelligence and the consequences of the VENONA revelations. The second part contains copies of ninety-nine VENONA decrypts selected to show what they looked like when distributed and to indicate the extent to which decryption was possible. This traffic originated for the most part in the United States and Moscow, though one cable from Mexico City to Moscow is included, and it deals with Communist Party, KGB, and GRU matters. While this book is an excellent introduction to the program, it does not deal in depth with the details of how the decrypted cables were analyzed or the impact of VENONA on the resulting espionage cases. These details are addressed in the six books discussed below.

The approach taken by British intelligence historian Nigel West in *Venona: The Greatest Secret of the Cold War* differs in several respects

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from those of the other books reviewed here. While each has chapters about how VENONA originated and functioned in America, West broadens the geographic scope. Although West's primary focus is Britain, he includes the impact of VENONA on Australian security, with its links to the United States and Britain, and he is the only author here to describe the links to France, Finland, and Sweden. Also, he uses the decrypts themselves; instead of just summarizing content, he quotes many of the actual messages in the narrative with gaps indicating the undecrypted portions. This accounts, in part, for the skimpy endnotes. Seeing the structure of the actual decrypts gives the reader a good feel for the uncertainties involved and helps explain why it was so difficult and sometimes impossible for the FBI to identify agents.

After the British joined the VENONA operation in the late 1940s, they began to decrypt and analyze cables sent over the London-Moscow and Moscow-Canberra circuits. (The results, with a mix of clear text and gaps, were released by NSA in 1996.) The task for the analyst was to use the clues provided by the clear text to determine the identity of the agent. While not always possible, West, after analyzing GRU traffic from London to Moscow, for the first time puts true names to Soviet agents identified previously only by their cryptonyms in VENONA. For example, Igor Montagu (cryptonym Nobility), brother of Ewen Montagu (author of *The Man Who Never Was*), was a life-long communist who spied for the GRU, though his family never suspected either. In another instance, West identifies "Intelligentsia," an active GRU agent, as the well known British scientist J. B. S. Haldane, who was helped by his wife Charlotte. For reasons not made clear, West concludes that the still unidentified VENONA Agent 19 (thought by some to be Harry Hopkins) was Eduard Beneš.

West is the only VENONA author to mention STELLA POLARIS, an operation that involved the Finnish acquisition of "100 boxes of Soviet cryptographic material" that was stored for a while in Sweden but eventually played a role in VENONA. Similarly, he provides new information on Soviet agent and British musician Ernest D. Weiss, while devoting a chapter to the more familiar but still interesting Cambridge network.

In the postscript chapter, West comments on how VENONA affected the lives of the cryptologists in Britain and America. The appendices include a list of cryptonyms of the London GRU traffic and

a glossary of Soviet cover names that were used in VENONA, arranged alphabetically by cryptonym, or cover name. Haynes and Klehr have similar lists, arranged alphabetically by the agents' true names. Access to both eases identification problems. In short, West gives the most comprehensive coverage of the VENONA program and provides a good place to become familiar with its scope and depth.

Professor Desmond Ball and David Horner, a Senior Fellow, are with the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University. Each has written extensively in the national security field. Their book, *Breaking the Codes*, was the first to be published after the release of the VENONA decrypts in 1995; it is primarily concerned with ten Australians who spied for Soviet intelligence. From 1943 to 1949 ten individuals delivered to their communist handlers classified documents from the Australian military, domestic security, and external affairs departments, as well as British and American strategic plans. By 1945 Australian security officials knew there were leaks in the system, but it was not until the Americans and British informed them of the VENONA decrypts from the Canberra-Moscow KGB link that the sources became known.

Several of the ten were first named publicly in 1954 by KGB colonel Vladimir Petrov and his code-clerk wife when they defected to Australia. However, in reality, as Ball and Horner reveal, some of the identities, although attributed to the Petrovs, actually came from VENONA. At the time, many Australian historians and political scientists dismissed the accusations as a conspiracy designed by politicians to win an election. In general, it was denied that the Soviets had conducted espionage in Australia in the 1940s. So intense and persistent was this belief that after rumors of the decrypts surfaced in the 1980s, Australian historian Frank Cain wrote (in 1991) that "there were no such decrypts." When Ball and Horner learned of the VENONA program, some years before its declassification, they were, of course, obligated to remain silent, never expecting the decrypts would be declassified.

*Breaking the Codes* includes a summary of the basic program, with much more detail concerning Australia. Though there were relatively few Australian decrypts (about two hundred out of five thousand), they had a major impact on national intelligence and security policy. The book also offers a short history of Australian intelligence, its World War II role (including naval intelligence and naval ULTRA),

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and its close links to Britain's Security Service (MI 5). The U.S. decision to deny classified intelligence to Australia in 1947 and the circumstances under which that access was restored in 1950 are also discussed. The chapter on the formation of the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) makes the point that it was created to demonstrate to the British and Americans that Australia was taking its security obligations seriously. In this regard, the case studies of the agents identified by VENONA are of real interest. In some cases, the evidence against the agents was enough to justify withdrawing their access to classified information, but not specific enough to dismiss them from their external affairs positions. Some remained in nonsensitive positions for over thirty years. Others, like Ian Milner (cryptonyms Bur/Dvorak), the so-called "Rhodes Scholar Spy," took a different path. When security began closing in, Milner defected to Czechoslovakia and worked for its intelligence service.

One revelation, now of historical interest only, was that during World War II Australian agents gave Allied war plans in the Pacific to their Soviet masters, who then "allowed" the Japanese to acquire them. Whether the Australian agents knew about this is unclear, but the authors quote Australian Communist Party leaders as saying, "We want a Russian victory, not necessarily an Allied victory."

The book is well written and impressively documented with primary sources. Although most of the VENONA decrypts are quoted in part, several are reproduced in facsimile. *Breaking the Codes* should put a full stop to the efforts of the professional-historian doubters from *Down Under* to vindicate their communist colleagues from charges of espionage. It can no longer be denied; the VENONA decrypts exist, and they are hard evidence.

In their 1992 book *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself*, written before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Library of Congress historian John Haynes and Emory University history professor Harvey Klehr wrote that although "American Communists owed their first loyalty to the motherland of communism rather than the United States . . . in practice few American Communists were spies." They went on to conclude that viewing "the American Communist Party chiefly as an instrument of espionage or a sort of fifth column misjudges its main purpose."

In their latest book, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America*, the same authors have revised their previous assessment, for reasons

they could not have foreseen. Between 1992 and 1998 they were granted unexpected access to the records of the American Communist Party (CPUSA), which until then were secretly kept in the Soviet archives. The initial result was another book, *The Secret World of American Communism* (1995), based in part on cable traffic between the KGB residences in New York and Moscow, that showed conclusively that the CPUSA had “an underground arm,” something long denied by the American party members and some historians. This book was read by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who then headed a commission on secrecy. He contacted the authors and Director of Central Intelligence John Deutch in May 1995. The issue was simple: if the Russians allowed Americans access to their cables, why shouldn't the United States do the same? A few months later, the VENONA decrypts were declassified. In many cases analysts were able to compare the NSA decrypts with the Soviet full-text originals. Charges of fabrication were soon put to rest. The facts in the VENONA documents, never intended to be released by either country, were damning. The previous cautious assessments had to be revised. Not a few “but hundreds of American Communists . . . abetted Soviet espionage in the United States” in the 1930s and 1940s. Some have never been identified beyond the cryptonyms used in the VENONA cables, but the evidence identifying many others, some long suspected, is irrefutable. Haynes and Klehr have done a masterful job of analysis and have presented it in a very readable fashion.

After interesting chapters that review the origins of the VENONA project and how the Soviet code was broken, Haynes and Klehr document in some detail who the American spies were, how they operated, and how Army and FBI intelligence analysts, working with partial decrypts, gradually linked cryptonyms to true names. Some were well known and highly placed in the government. For example, VENONA cables confirmed that Alger Hiss (Ales) of the State Department was a GRU agent and that Harry Dexter White, assistant secretary of the treasury, served the NKGB.\* There is more on the spy ring run by Julius Rosenberg and his wife; he was an active NKGB agent,

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\* Some use a generic KGB, while others refer to NKGB and MGB for the entire period discussed. Actually, the Soviet foreign intelligence organization had several names: NKVP, NKGB, MVD, MGB, KI, and KGB (first used in 1954). The name NKGB was used between 1941–1946, the period containing most of the VENONA cables.



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and she knew it. The VENONA decrypts also show that the American networks violated nearly every principle of clandestine operations—most of the American agents had received little or no training. A good example of this is the Golos-Bentley network, which functioned in Washington, D.C. The decrypts confirm that careless tradecraft was one reason why the NKGB took over the agents from the American communists who initially ran them. The takeover by the NKGB, VENONA makes clear, is the principal reason why Elizabeth Bentley defected to the FBI. Her testimony, criticized in the media as “the bizarre rantings of a neurotic old maid,” was later confirmed by VENONA, and it contributed greatly to the disintegration of the Soviet espionage networks in America.

Despite their sloppiness, it cannot be denied that the Soviets were amazingly successful. VENONA makes absolutely clear that they had active agents in the U.S. State Department, Treasury Department, Justice Department, Senate committee staffs, the military services, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the Manhattan Project, and the White House, as well as wartime agencies. No modern government was more thoroughly penetrated. The Soviets were even told about the VENONA project, but there was little they could do about it at that point. Another measure of the magnitude of Soviet penetration in the United States is provided in the appendices. One lists 349 Americans and U.S. residents identified by VENONA who spied for the Soviets; another lists 139 Soviet spies known from other sources.

The authors recognize that the VENONA decrypts are not infallible. They base their conclusions about Soviet espionage on a variety of corroborating evidence. They also acknowledge that some messages contain errors, and they are careful to allow for them. For example, Morton Sobell (convicted with the Rosenbergs) was identified in one decrypt as having only one leg, a point he has easily disproved.

Still, not everyone is convinced. Faced with the emerging power of truth, some have adopted naive interpretations of the evidence. Scottish professor Roger Sandilands, biographer of White House assistant Laughlin Currie, is a case in point. In a series of postings on the Internet directed at Haynes and Klehr, Sandilands suggests that the VENONA cables reporting Currie’s FBI-monitored conversations and meetings with the NKGB resident in Washington can plausibly be interpreted as reports of “innocent conversations.” He neglects, among other things, to point out that Currie did not report his

contacts with known Soviet intelligence officers and was not representing the government in those contacts, and that others present were suspected Soviet agents. But these desperate efforts at self-justification are now in the minority. For most, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* is the final word.

In 1991, the KGB and Crown Publishers of New York conceived a precedent-setting publishing agreement. The original idea was to write a series of Cold War intelligence histories coauthored by Soviet historians and American counterparts, with each side providing appropriate primary-source material. However, before the contract was signed, the Soviet Union disappeared. Nevertheless, the KGB's foreign intelligence service successor, the SVR, decided to conclude the agreement—only to have Crown Publishing withdraw. The coauthors already lined up were thus left to their own devices, and all found their own publishers. For historian Allen Weinstein and his coauthor, former KGB operative Alexander Vassiliev, it was Random House, and *The Haunted Wood* is the result.

Like Haynes and Klehr, Weinstein and Vassiliev began their research in Russia, but in their case they were given access, in 1993, to portions of the KGB/SVR archives, not just the American Communist Party records—material never before made available to historians. By 1995 this material had revealed more than the SVR intended, and further access was denied. By then it was too late; there was enough material for a book, and a manuscript was drafted. When the VENONA decrypts were released, the authors found they corroborated many of the cases in their draft book. Moreover, forty of the partially decrypted VENONA cables matched the full-text cables previously released for *The Haunted Wood*—a historian's dream come true. All of this material, combined with defector testimony, allowed the authors to clarify previously known operations and add corroborating detail. For instance, the cables revealed that it was Cambridge spy Kim Philby who told the NKGB that Elizabeth Bentley had defected to the FBI. The new material confirms details concerning the atom spies, Harry Dexter White's role, the Hiss case, and a number of others. The chapter on the OSS (long known to have been deeply penetrated) adds new names and corroborates agents identified in VENONA. No intelligence service had so many moles. Regarding the nonexecutive-branch agents, the authors also expose several previously unreported penetrations. The most spectacular example is the case of

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Congressman Samuel Dickstein, the man who introduced legislation that eventually produced the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Dickstein spied for the NKVD in the late 1930s; he was one of the few who served his Soviet masters strictly for money.

*The Haunted Wood* also adds new detail to the case of Hollywood film producer Boris Morros, a Soviet spy for years before being discovered, thanks to VENONA. Questioned by the FBI, Morros quickly realized his predicament, and to save his skin, he volunteered to become a double agent. He did a good job. In his 1959 book, *My Ten Years as a Counterspy*, Morros leads the reader to believe that it was he who sought out the FBI. Part of the same espionage ring was Martha Dodd. Her father was the American ambassador to Germany in the 1930s. She started her spying in Berlin and continued well into the 1950s. She and her American husband, who was also a Soviet agent, escaped to Eastern Europe, where they remained until their deaths. The Soviet files show that she became the lover of her KGB recruiter and tried for years to marry him, though he had a wife and family in Russia.

The documentary evidence is cited in endnotes by KGB file number, volume number, and page number—a system that raised concerns among reviewers, scholars, and people named as agents, because there is no way to check such citations. For example, in the case of Michael Straight, recruited for the NKVD by Anthony Blunt in the 1930s while both were at Cambridge, *The Haunted Wood* makes the statement that Straight met with and reported to Theodore Mally and Arnold Deutsch, two well known NKVD recruiters in England. Not so, says Straight: he never met either man, let alone reported to them. At the time, he was still in school, and Blunt was his only contact. There is no way to determine the basis for the *Haunted Wood* judgment; all the others involved are dead. It is true, however, that the VENONA decrypts do not provide any corroboration. Perhaps the records were mistranslated or misinterpreted, or perhaps Blunt made erroneous claims to enhance his own position. The alternative, that they were fabricated to perpetuate some Soviet myth or otherwise deceive the West, is less tenable. In any event, final judgment in cases like this must be withheld.

The authors acknowledge that doubts will remain concerning particular cases until complete access to the KGB files is possible. Still, from the evidence that Weinstein and Vassiliev present, it is fair to

conclude that during World War II, the Soviets treated the United States as an espionage enemy, not as an ally. Also, mainly because of VENONA, their postwar operations were closed down, bringing to an end the era of the ideological communist agent.

The scope of the books described so far is too broad to look closely at any particular case. However, journalists Joseph Albright and Marcia Kunstel (husband and wife) do just that in their book *Bombshell: The Secret Story of America's Unknown Atomic Spy Conspiracy*. They tell the story of one Soviet agent, Harvard physicist Theodore Hall, known in VENONA as Mlad. When the VENONA decrypts were first released, Mlad's identity was blacked out. A subsequent release left his name in clear text, but by then, on the basis of the clues remaining in the original text, *Washington Post* journalist Michael Dobbs and scholar Herbert Romerstein, who studied the American Communist Party, had already identified him. They soon learned that Hall was living in Cambridge, England, and both interviewed him before publishing any articles naming him as Mlad. Albright and Kunstel, hearing about the story while working in Moscow, went farther and produced their book. It is based on VENONA, sixteen days of interviews with Hall, and interviews with some of his former controllers and Western intelligence officers.

Like Whittaker Chambers and Elizabeth Bentley before him, Ted Hall was a committed communist. He too volunteered to be a Soviet agent. Quickly accepted when the NKVD learned he worked with the Manhattan Project, he soon began passing them atomic secrets, using couriers. After the war Hall was investigated by the FBI, but there was not enough evidence to prosecute him without revealing VENONA. Nevertheless, he was not taking any chances. He moved with his wife to Cambridge in the early 1950s.

*Bombshell* also reveals the roles of three of Hall's courier-colleagues, Americans Saville Sax, and Morris and Lona Cohen. The former escaped prosecution when the FBI decided to protect VENONA. The Cohens, warned by the MGB, avoided capture in America, and later served the KGB in England, as "Peter and Helen Kroger." While working with a KGB illegal, Gordon Lonsdale, the Cohens were caught, tried, and imprisoned. They were later traded to the Soviet Union, where they spent the rest of their lives.

Hall admits his communism, and, indirectly in the book, his espionage, adding that he is "by no means ashamed" of what he did—"it

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was for the good of mankind." In a later interview shortly before his death, shown as part of episode 21 of CNN's *Cold War* series, Hall finally admitted, explicitly, his treachery, still with no apology.

There is one more book based on VENONA due out in 2000, the late Eric Briendel and Herbert Romerstein's *The Venona Secrets: The Soviet Union's World War II Espionage Campaign against the United States and How America Fought Back: A Story of Espionage, Counterespionage, and Betrayal*. It has distinction beyond its long title. It will add corroboration to the work of Haynes and Klehr with new documentation and analysis, putting particular emphasis on the role of the Communist Party in Soviet espionage in America. Undoubtedly, the most controversial facet of this book will be the portion arguing that Harry Hopkins was VENONA Agent 19. This will surely not be a popular thesis.

Two nagging, inadequately treated questions remain. The first, why so many Americans and citizens of its wartime allies spied for Stalin, is dealt with in varying degrees in each book. The collective answer is the agents' deep belief in the communist ideology. But that does not explain how such intelligent people could have blindly believed in a cause when so much evidence contradicted its utopian claims. The second question, perhaps the more important of the two from an intelligence point of view, is, what difference did all the spying make in the end? This answer is left by each of the authors to future historians. Thus one might reasonably conclude that there is surely one more book about VENONA to be written.

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