

UNCLASSIFIED

# DAILY ENTERPRISE



## (U) HISTORY TODAY - 9 October 2014

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(U) In 1995 NSA declassified and released publicly a large collection of decrypts from Project VENONA. Under this project in the 1940s and 1950s, NSA (and its predecessor organizations) had exploited a Soviet encryption error and solved approximately 3,000 messages sent between KGB stations in the United States and Moscow.

(U) These messages gave direct insights into KGB espionage activities in the U.S., including the startling fact that nearly two hundred Americans were passing classified information to the Soviet Union.

(U) The KGB had an extensive system of coverwords for their communications; people, organizations, locations -- all had coverwords that masked their identification.

(U) As soon as possible after processing, the decrypts were distributed to a few cleared individuals in the FBI, which investigated the espionage activities mentioned. The meaning of some coverwords was obvious, some became clear during investigation, based on context within the message, and some coverwords were never clearly identified. Ultimately, the FBI made definite correlations for about half the individuals mentioned in the decrypts, had tentative identifications for a few, and had a lot more that could not be solved.

(U) If a correlation was made at the time a decrypt was originally released, the correct name was put in a footnote to the distributed product.

(U) It should be noted that the KGB used coverwords for just about everybody they regularly mentioned in reports, not just those engaged in espionage. For example, President Franklin Roosevelt had a cover designation, though he was not involved in espionage.

(U) Back to 1995. When NSA processed the VENONA decrypts for release, it was decided that it would be necessary to redact the names of people mentioned in connection with espionage in KGB cables who were neither public figures nor previously associated publicly with Soviet spying.

(U) Thus, the original footnote on some VENONA messages saying that the coverword "KAPITAN" referred to President Roosevelt was left intact. However, a few original VENONA footnotes which equated the coverword "MLAD" to a physicist named Theodore Hall were edited out. Although VENONA messages stated clearly that MLAD had passed atomic secrets to the Soviets, Hall, still living in 1995, had never been charged with espionage. (VENONA decrypts, considered top secret, could be used only as background for investigations; indictments had to be based on evidence developed apart from VENONA; no evidence of espionage apart from VENONA could be found in MLAD's case.)

(U) As it happened, based on clues in the message itself, a *Washington Post* reporter made the correct correlation and published it.

 HISTORY TODAY - 9 Oct. 2014 (VENONA logo.)

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(b) (3) - P.L. 86-36

(U) Due to the large number of messages that had to be processed for release and the amount of staff time available, NSA's leadership decided to release the decrypts in several groupings. The first group, which was judged of primary importance to all who were interested in the Cold War, made public the decrypts concerning those who betrayed U.S. atomic secrets to the USSR.

(U) Messages concerning Julius Rosenberg were included in this group, even though Rosenberg was only on the periphery of atomic espionage -- he had no atomic secrets to share, but he brokered meetings between KGB personnel and at least two individuals who did have these secrets. However, his case was easily the most controversial in modern American history and was judged to be of extremely high interest to historians, so the Rosenberg decrypts were included in the first package of released documents.

(U) In one case, to be discussed in more detail next month in *History Today*, Rosenberg made it possible for the KGB to recruit their first insider from the U.S. atomic bomb project. According to a later VENONA decrypt, the KGB gave a bonus worth \$100 to Rosenberg for this. Rosenberg had refused to accept money for his espionage work, even reimbursement for expenses, but apparently did occasionally accept gifts in kind.

(U) For Julius Rosenberg's story, read [this October 7, 2008 History Today article](#).

(U) The logo that accompanies this article, by the way, does not date from the days the VENONA project was active (the 1940s to 1980). It was created for the ceremony at which VENONA was released to the public.

(U) Share historical topics with interesting folks. Visit the Center for Cryptologic History's blog, [History Rocks](#) ("go history rocks").

(U) [Larger view of photo](#).

(U) Have a question or comment on "History Today"? Contact us at DL cch or

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