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VENONA: ONE OF THE GREATEST SECRETS OF THE COLD WAR

American and British intelligence agencies are currently in hot water over Iraq. But they were very successful in the Cold War – and the story of that top secret operation has only come to light since the end of the Cold War.

The “Venona” project was a long-running activity of the American and British intelligence agencies which began in February 1943 and ran until October 1 1980 (by which time the Soviet Union had changed its encryption techniques). It decoded almost 3,000 Soviet messages.

Unlike the more well known “Enigma” project (which cracked the German radio traffic in World War II), the messages were not done instantly (in “real time”). The Soviet codes were more difficult to break than was originally estimated. In some cases it took many years to break the codes. Some messages were never decoded.

The Venona project shows that the Soviet spying activities in the United States were far more extensive than was guessed at the time. For example one of the first Soviet messages to be decoded was a 1944 report from the KGB New York office showing that the Soviet Union had infiltrated the Anglo-American atomic bomb project. This inside information helped the Soviet Union develop the atomic bomb quicker and at a much lower cost than would have been the case without the information.

It also enabled Stalin to take a more aggressive stance in confronting the United States because he also had the atomic bomb. For instance, Stalin, who was not usually a risk-taker, may not have taken the risk in supporting North Korea’s 1950 invasion of South Korea had it not been for the 1949 successful explosion of the Soviet atomic bomb. He knew that the United States would not now use its atomic bomb because the Soviet Union had its own to be used in retaliation. It remains a matter of historical speculation of what would have happened to world affairs if Stalin had not received the inside information and so had taken much longer to develop the Soviet atomic bomb. Following Stalin’s death in 1953, Churchill argued that this was a new opportunity to end the Cold War. If the Soviet Union had not had the atomic weapon in 1953, then it might have been more willing to accept Churchill’s invitation to end the Cold War. This would have nipped one of the most expensive projects in world history – the US-Soviet 1945-1990 arms race – in the bud. World War II created a new era for Soviet spying. In the 1920s and 1930s, Stalin directed most of his country’s espionage activities against his European and Asian enemies and allies. The United States was not a major target for him because although it was gaining in

economic power, it was still only a minor military power (as recently as 1940 the US Army was still smaller than the Greek one). There was only a minute Soviet espionage and diplomatic presence in the US.

1941 was the turning point. In June, Germany invaded the USSR and in December Japan attacked the US. After December 7 1941, the war was truly a “world” war. Stalin saw that the war would wreck most of his European enemies and allies, and so the post-war world would consist of two major powers: the USSR and US (with the UK as a less significant third major power). Therefore from 1942, the US became a major Soviet espionage target – and the US let it happen. The US gave the USSR extensive military and financial aid (it was the second largest recipient after the UK). As part of the aid effort, the US allowed Soviet military officers, engineers and technicians to enter the US. For example, nearly 400,000 American trucks went to the USSR and so Soviet personnel had to be trained in their maintenance. Entire Soviet naval crews arrived for training to sail the American-built combat and cargo ships.

The Venona project showed that the groups of Soviet personnel always included spies. They were watching not only American developments (such as the creation of the atomic bomb) but also keeping an eye on the other Soviet personnel to make sure they did not try to desert to live in the US. Some people did try to abscond and the Venona project showed that they were – contrary to American law – tracked down, kidnapped and smuggled back to the USSR.

The Soviet spies recruited members of the American Communist Party and others to spy on the US. The spying was much greater than was publicised at. Some of the spies were caught and punished (such as the atomic spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg who went to the electric chair in 1953). But the Venona material was not made public for fear of alerting the Soviet Union to the extent to which the US could break its codes.

Indeed, not only were Moscow and the American public kept in the dark but so were many parts of the US Government. The CIA was not included in the project until 1953. The White House of President Harry Truman (1945-52) was not told at all because the FBI and US Army suspected that the politicians could not be trusted to keep a secret. It is not clear how much Truman’s successors were told.

One result of this blanket of secrecy was that Harry Truman distrusted J Edgar Hoover of the Federal Bureau of Intelligence because he suspected that the FBI were over-exaggerating the stories of Soviet spying. The FBI were not – but they could not explain why without revealing Venona.

A second implication was that many civil liberty groups campaigned for the “innocence” of the some of the traitors when, in fact, it is clear from Venona that they were guilty as charged. Atomic spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg really were guilty – but that has only become clear since 1995 with the release of the Venona material.



A third implication is that the US Government proved that it could in fact keep a secret (even if the secret had to be kept away from the talkative politicians). The usual complaint from foreign governments is that the American system of “open government” means that secrets do not remain secret for long.

For example in 1971, Daniel Ellsberg, a researcher into why the Americans went wrong in Vietnam, released 7,000 pages of documents. McMahon’s Australian Government was one of the first to complain to President Nixon (who had not been involved in commissioning the project) that it was pointless having secret negotiations with the Americans if they are going to appear later in the newspapers. The complaints over the Pentagon Papers stimulated Nixon into creating the “plumbers unit” to stop the “leaks” – and these were the team caught in 1972 in the Watergate Building.

Therefore few people could ever have suspected the US Government of being able to keep Venona secret for so long. Not only was the code-breaking a great American triumph but so was the ability to keep it secret.

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