



Above: Ethel and Julius Rosenberg return in a patrol van to the Federal House of Detention in New York City on April 5, 1951, after hearing Judge Irving Kaufman sentence them to death for atomic espionage.

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Atomic Espionage and the Rosenberg Case

The following documents show how the Soviet Union obtained secret information about the atomic bomb during World War II and how the U.S. government responded to that theft. The most important materials came from Klaus Fuchs and Theodore Hall, two physicists working at the bomb project's main scientific laboratory in Los Alamos, New Mexico. But a New York City engineer and his wife, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, paid the heaviest price. Significantly, all these people were Communists.

The first document is part of the confession that the German-born Fuchs made to a British intelligence agent shortly before his arrest in February 1950. In that statement, Fuchs discusses the political convictions that led him to give information to the Soviet Union and the nature of his espionage activities.

Fuchs had been captured because of a tip-off from the VENONA project, the top-secret effort to decipher the text of thousands of intercepted wartime telegrams between the KGB's American representatives and their Moscow superiors. By 1948 the U.S. code-breakers could read enough of that correspondence to alert American security

Klaus Fuchs, "Confession to William Skardon," in *Klaus Fuchs: Atom Spy*, ed. Robert Chadwell Williams (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 181-84, 186; New York KGB, Telegram to Moscow, November 12, 1944, No. 1585, VENONA files; New York KGB, Telegram to Moscow, November 14, 1944, No. 1600, VENONA files; New York KGB, Telegram to Moscow, November 27, 1944, No. 1657, VENONA files; Office Memorandum on Julius Rosenberg, July 17, 1950, Julius Rosenberg Headquarters File, No. 188; J. Edgar Hoover's memorandum to the Attorney General, July 19, 1950, Rosenberg file, No. 97; Judge Irving Kaufman, "Sentencing of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg," in transcript of record, *Julius Rosenberg and Ethel Rosenberg v. The United States of America*, Supreme Court of the United States, October Term, 1951, 1612-16; correspondence of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, in Robert and Michael Meeropol, *We Are Your Sons: The Legacy of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 89-90, 206-7.

officials to the Soviet penetration of the Manhattan Project, as the program to develop the bomb was called. They could not publicize their findings, however. VENONA remained so highly classified that the government did not release any of its decrypted texts until 1995. When it did, not only did they corroborate the guilt of dozens of accused individuals, but they also made it possible to grasp the scope of the Soviet Union's World War II espionage operations. The following documents—three telegrams—reveal some of those operations. The first reports on Theodore Hall's initial contacts with the KGB. The second describes how Julius Rosenberg recruited his friends to collect military and industrial secrets for the Soviets and how he arranged to have his wife's brother David Greenglass send him information from Los Alamos. The third KGB telegram contains information about Ethel Rosenberg, indicating that, although she supported them, she had not been involved with her husband's espionage activities.

The FBI knew that Ethel Rosenberg was not a spy. Even so, as the next two documents reveal, both the FBI and the Justice Department wanted to prosecute her as a way to make her husband confess. That legal farce turned into tragedy when Judge Irving Kaufman sentenced the couple to death. The next document contains excerpts from his remarks as he imposed that sentence. Kaufman's moralistic tone masked serious improprieties. FBI files indicate that he had been in touch with the prosecution during the trial and knew that FBI and Justice Department officials hoped that the threat of the electric chair would force a confession out of the couple.

It did not. Even in the death house, both Julius and Ethel Rosenberg continued to insist that they were the innocent victims of a "political frame-up." The final two documents contain excerpts from their letters to each other as they waited for a reprieve and struggled to make sense of their fate. Their appeals denied, the Rosenbergs were executed on June 19, 1953.

KLAUS FUCHS

Confession to William Skardon

January 27, 1950

Fuchs was a student in Germany when Hitler came to power.

I had already joined the Communist Party because I felt I had to be in some organization. . . .

I was in the underground until I left Germany. I was sent out by the Party, because they said that I must finish my studies because after the revolution in Germany people would be required with technical knowledge to take part in the building up of the Communist Germany. I went first to France and then to England, where I studied and at the same time I tried to make a serious study of the bases of Marxist philosophy. . . .

I accepted for a long time that what you heard about Russia internally could be deliberate lies. I had my doubts for the first time on acts of foreign policies of Russia; the Russo-German pact was difficult to understand, but in the end I did accept that Russia had done it to gain time, that during that time she was expanding her own influence in the Balkans against the influence of Germany. Finally Germany's attack on Russia seemed to confirm that Russia was not shirking and was prepared to carry out a foreign policy with the risk of war with Germany. . . .

Shortly after my release [from detention as an enemy alien] I was asked to help Professor Peierls¹ in Birmingham, on some war work. I accepted it and I started work without knowing at first what the work was. I doubt whether it would have made any difference to my subsequent actions if I had known the nature of the work beforehand. When I learned the purpose of the work I decided to inform Russia and I established contact through another member of the Communist Party. Since that time I have had continuous contact with persons who were completely unknown to me, except that I knew that they would hand whatever information I gave them to the Russian authorities. At this time I had complete confidence in Russian policy and I believed that

¹Rudolf Peierls was a German refugee physicist in England who worked on the atomic bomb during World War II.

the Western Allies deliberately allowed Russia and Germany to fight each other to the death. I had, therefore, no hesitation in giving all the information I had, even though occasionally I tried to concentrate mainly on giving information about the results of my own work. . . .

There is nobody I know by name who is concerned with collecting information for the Russian authorities. There are people whom I know by sight whom I trusted with my life and who trusted me with theirs and I do not know that I shall be able to do anything that might in the end give them away. They are not inside of the project, but they are the intermediaries between myself and the Russian Government.

At first I thought that all I would do would be to inform the Russian authorities that work upon the atom bomb was going on. They wished to have more details and I agreed to supply them. I concentrated at first mainly on the products of my own work, but in particular at Los Alamos I did what I consider to be the worst I have done, namely to give information about the principles of the design of the plutonium bomb. Later on at Harwell [site of the first British nuclear reactor] I began to sift it, but it is difficult to say exactly when and how I did it because it was a process which went up and down with my inner struggles. The last time I handed over information was in February or March, 1949.

NEW YORK KGB

Telegram to Moscow

November 12, 1944

USSR

Ref. No:

Issued: 25/4/1961

Copy No: 204

DECISION TO MAINTAIN CONTACT WITH THEODORE HALL (1944)

From: NEW YORK

To: MOSCOW

No: 1585

12 Nov. 44

To VIKTOR.^[i]

BEK^[ii] visited Theodore HALL [TEODOR KhOLL],^[iii] 19 years old, the son of a furrier. He is a graduate of HARVARD University. As a talented physicist he was taken on for government work. He was a GYMNAST [FIZKUL 'TURNIK]^[iv] and conducted work in the Steel Founders' Union. [a] According to BEK's account HALL has an exceptionally keen mind and a broad outlook, and is politically developed. At the present time H. is in charge of a group at "CAMP-2"^[v] (SANTA-FE). H. handed over to BEK a report about the CAMP and named the key personnel employed on ENORMOUS.^[vi] He decided to do this on the advice of his colleague Saville SAX [SAVIL SAKS],^[vii] a GYMNAST living in TYRE.^[viii] SAX's mother is a FELLOW-COUNTRYMAN [ZEMLYaK]^[ix] and works for RUSSIAN WAR RELIEF. With the aim of hastening a meeting with a competent person, H. on the following day sent a copy of the report by S. to the PLANT[ZAVOD].^[x] ALEKSEJ^[xi] received S. H. had to leave for CAMP-2 in two days' time. He [b] was compelled to make a decision quickly. Jointly with MAY[MAJ]^[xii] he gave BEK consent to feel out H., to assure him that everything was in order and to arrange liaison

with him. H. left his photograph and came to an understanding with BEK about a place for meeting him. BEK met S. [1 group garbled] our automobile. We consider it expedient to maintain liaison with H. [1 group unidentified] through S. and not to bring in anybody else. MAY has no objection to this. We shall send the details by post.

No. 897
11th November

[Signature missing]

Distribution

[Notes and Comments overleaf]

Notes: [a] I.e. Trade Union [PROFSOYuZ].

[b] I.e. ALEKSEJ.

Comments: [i] VIKTOR : Lt. Gen. P. M. FITIN.
 [ii] BEK : Sergej Nikolaevich KURNAKOV.
 [iii] HALL : Theodore Alvin HALL.
 [iv] GYMNAST : Possibly a member of the Young Communist League.
 [v] CAMP-2 : LOS ALAMOS.
 [vi] ENORMOUS : Manhattan Engineering District-U.S. Atomic Energy Project.
 [vii] SAX
 [viii] TYRE : NEW YORK CITY.
 [ix] FELLOWCOUNTRYMAN : Member of the Communist Party.
 [x] PLANT : Soviet Consulate.
 [xi] ALEKSEJ : Anatolij Antonovich YaKOVLEV, Soviet Vice-Consul in NEW YORK.
 [xii] MAY : Stepan Zakharovich APRESYAN, Soviet Vice-Consul in NEW YORK.

NEW YORK KGB

Telegram to Moscow

November 14, 1944

VENONA

Reissue (T293)

From: NEW YORK

To: MOSCOW

No: 1600

14 November 1944

To VIKTOR [i].

LIBERAL [ii] has safely carried through the contracting of "Kh'YuS" [iii]. Kh'YuS is a good pal of METR's [iv]. We propose to pair them off and get them to photograph their own materials having given a camera for this purpose. Kh'YuS is a good photographer, has a large darkroom [KAMERA] and all the equipment but he does not have a Leica. LIBERAL will receive the films from METR for passing on. Direction of the probationers will be continued through LIBERAL, this will ease the load on him. Details about the contracting are in letter no. 8.

OSA [v] has agreed to cooperate with us in drawing in ShMEL' [vi] (henceforth "KALIBR" — see your no. 5258[a]) with a view to ENORMOUS [ENORMOZ] [vii]. On summons from KALIBR she is leaving on 22 November for the Camp 2 area [viii]. KALIBR will have a week's leave. Before OSA's departure LIBERAL will carry out two briefing meetings.

No. 901

ANTON [ix]

Notes: [a] Not available.

Comments:

- [i] VIKTOR: Lt. Gen. P. M. FITIN.
- [ii] LIBERAL: Julius ROSENBERG.
- [iii] Kh'YuS: i.e. HUGHES, probably Joel BARR or Alfred SARANT.
- [iv] METR: i.e. METER, probably either Joel BARR or Alfred SARANT.
- [v] OSA: i.e. WASP, Ruth GREENGLASS.
- [vi] ShMEL'/KALIBR: i.e. BUMBLEBEE/CALIBRE, David GREENGLASS.
- [vii] ENORMOZ: Atomic Energy Project.
- [viii] Camp 2: LOS ALAMOS Laboratory, New Mexico.
- [ix] ANTON: Leonid Romanovich KVASNIKOV.

1 May 1975

NEW YORK KGB

Telegram to Moscow

November 27, 1944

VENONA

Reissue (T9.2)

From: NEW YORK

To: MOSCOW

No: 1657

27 November 1944

To VIKTOR [i].

Your no. 5356 [a]. Information on LIBERAL's [ii] wife [iii]. Surname that of her husband, first name ETHEL, 29 years old. Married five years. Finished secondary school. A FELLOWCOUNTRYMAN [ZEM-LYaK] [iv] since 1938. Sufficiently well developed politically. Knows about her husband's work and the role of METR [v] and NIL [vi]. In view of delicate health does not work. Is characterized positively and as a devoted person.

Notes: [a] Not available.

Comments:

- [i] VIKTOR: Lt. Gen. P. M. FITIN.
- [ii] LIBERAL: Julius Rosenberg.
- [iii] Ethel ROSENBERG, nee GREENGLASS.
- [iv] ZEMLYaK: Member of the Communist Party.
- [v] METR: Probably Joel BARR or Alfred SARANT.
- [vi] NIL: Unidentified.

A. H. BELMONT

Office Memorandum on Julius Rosenberg

July 17, 1950

To: D. M. LADD

From: A. H. BELMONT

Subject: JULIUS ROSENBERG
ESPIONAGE-R.

At 1:20 pm, I attempted to reach Mr. James McNerney² to furnish him with the summary memorandum dated July 17, 1950, regarding Julius Rosenberg. Mr. McNerney was at lunch. I was successful in reaching him at 2:40 pm, at which time Supervisor Robert Lamphere and I furnished him with the original of the memorandum to the Attorney General and Mr. McNerney copy. Mr. McNerney thoroughly digested the memorandum and rendered the following opinion. . . .

Relative to subject Ethel Rosenberg, Mr. McNerney advised that there is insufficient evidence to issue process against her at this time. He advised that the evidence against her depends upon the statement of Ruth Greenglass that Ethel Rosenberg talked her into going to Albuquerque to see David Greenglass to see if he would cooperate with the Russians in furnishing information. Mr. McNerney requested that any additional information concerning Ethel Rosenberg be furnished the Department. He was of the opinion that it might be possible to utilize her as a lever against her husband.

²James McNerney was the assistant attorney general in charge of the Criminal Division of the Department of Justice.

J. EDGAR HOOVER

Memorandum to the Attorney General

July 19, 1950

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

DIRECTOR, FBI

JULIUS ROSENBERG
ESPIONAGE-R

CONFIDENTIAL

In my memorandum to you dated July 17, 1950, I brought to your attention additional information with respect to the espionage activities of David and Ruth Greenglass and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. I asked for your opinion as to the institution of prosecutive action against Ethel Rosenberg and Ruth Greenglass.

In connection with the above, I desire to bring to your attention the fact that United States Attorney Everett Grantham has expressed the desire to include in the indictment in Santa Fe, New Mexico, both Julius Rosenberg and Ruth Greenglass. It would appear that it might also be possible to proceed against Ethel Rosenberg under such an indictment on the basis of her having urged Ruth Greenglass to approach David Greenglass to act as an espionage agent.

There is no question but that if Julius Rosenberg would furnish the details of his extensive espionage activities it would be possible to proceed against other individuals. In the fact of Rosenberg's refusal I believe that you may desire to seriously consider instituting additional process against him in New Mexico. This might result in a change in his attitude. I also feel that proceeding against his wife might serve as a lever in this matter.

I would like to have your opinion with respect to instituting further process against the Rosenbergs. I would also appreciate having any decision you may reach relative to prosecution of Ruth Greenglass.

*In memory of Andrea Eagan
(1943–1993)*

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