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Secrets of the Venona files

A fair bit has been written about the release earlier this month of documents related to the Venona project — the wartime effort undertaken by the Army's Signal Intelligence Service to intercept and decrypt coded cable traffic between Soviet installations in the United States (primarily the embassy in Washington and the consulate in New York) and Moscow.

The chief goal of Venona — initiated in 1943 — was to learn as much as possible about Soviet espionage activities in this country. Only 2,200 intercepted messages were successfully translated — largely because the Russians employed a highly sophisticated code. Early on, however, Army analysts began to discover weaknessess in the Soviet encryption system.

And shortly thereafter, in 1945, the effort was advanced by a series of counterintelligence breakthroughs: the defection of Soviet cipher clerk Igor Gouzenko in Ottawa; the voluntary confession of Elizabeth Bentley, who'd served Moscow as an espionage courier; and the FBI's re-interview of Time editor and ex-Soviet agent Whittaker Chambers. This trio provided specific data that made the messages easier to interpret.

Venona's existence has been public information since the early '80s. FBI special agent Robert Lamphere wrote in detail about Venona nearly 10 years ago, confirming that the FBI learned about Julius Rosenberg's spy ring through the intercepts. But he was forbidden actually to quote from the documents. Similarly, no evidence gleaned from the intercepts was ever introduced in any court. As a consequence, some spies were never prosecuted. Washington deemed Venona's secrecy more important than jailing a handful of Soviet agents.

But America's dedication to secrecy in this realm became an obsession. And the fact that American scholars, after communism's demise, began to plumb Russian archives heightened the incongruity of Washington's continuing refusal to release 50-year-old papers.

Indeed, despite mounting pressure to do so from Western researchers, the FBI and its sister agencies refused to budge. As recently as May, in fact, the late Les Aspin, a member of the president's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB), asked the intelligence community whether the intercepts could be released. After receiving a pro forma negative reply, Mr. Aspin inquired about the controversial wartime role played by physicist and Manhattan Project head J. Robert Oppenheimer, the "Father of the Atomic Bomb."

In a memoir published last year, an important ex-KGB general, Pavel Sudoplatov, wrote that Oppenheimer had knowingly made it possible for Soviet "moles" planted at the Los Alamos research center to copy secret documents related to the development of the bomb. The book, written with the assistance of the general's son and two American journalists — Jerrold and Leona Schecter — didn't actually label Oppenheimer a Soviet spy. But the activities it describes bespeak a distinction without a difference.

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The furor in the academic community was immense. Many charged Sudoplatov and the Schecters with posthumous character assassination. Long since dead, Oppenheimer — whose wife, mistress, brother and sister-in-law had all been communists — was deprived of his security clearance in 1954.

In this context, Mr. Aspin agreed to ask the FBI whether any information in its possession — from Venona or from other sources —either supported or refuted the claim that Oppenheimer had willfully assisted Moscow. FBI Director Louis Freeh replied that nothing bolstering the suggestion that Oppenheimer aided the Soviet Union could be found. In fact, according to Mr. Freeh, a number of seemingly exculpatory documents had been discovered.

But even as detractors of Gen. Sudoplatov and the Schecters began to celebrate, a separate process —headed up by U.S. Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan — was under way on Capitol Hill. Long concerned with what he views as excessive secrecy on the part of the intelligence community, Mr. Moynihan was taking testimony from scholars protesting the continuing unavailability of the Venona intercepts.

The senator communicated his own inability to grasp the need to keep the files secret to the relevant agencies. Suddenly, the National Security Agency (NSA), the CIA and the FBI saw fit to reconsider the issue. Thus, the set of documents released — albeit with deletions — earlier this month, as well as the promise that additional Venona files will be made available later this year.

It's not surprising that press coverage has focused on the guilt of the Rosenbergs and their compatriots. Many of the Venona documents concern the Rosenbergs directly; moreover, such doubt as may have remained about their guilt has finally been set to rest.

But it's curious that there's been virtually no discussion of what the intercepts indicate about Oppenheimer. A guide to the documents published by the NSA virtually invites inquiry in this realm; it notes that "the [espionage)] role played by the person covernamed 'Veksel' remains uncertain, but troubling." It's clear "Veksel" is J. Robert Oppenheimer, although the footnotes to the actual documents suggest only that the cover name may "possibly" be that of "Dr. Julius Robert Oppenheimer."

Actually, there's no room for doubt. "Veksel" is described as the director of "the reservation" (Los Alamos), the site of "the main practical research work on 'Enormous' [the Manhattan project]."

It appears that a Soviet agent was dispatched to Chicago in early 1945 to "re-establish contact" with "Veksel." At a minimum, therefore, Oppenheimer had been in contact with Soviet intelligence at some earlier stage. This accounts for the NSA's sense that Oppenheimer's role "remains troubling."

In all likelihood, forthcoming Venona documents will tell us more about Oppenheimer. As things stand, however, Gen. Sudoplatov and the Schecters have considerable cause for satisfaction. Not so, their critics.

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