



Secrets, Lies, & Atomic Spies

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In August 1945, the United States destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atomic bombs, developed after an unprecedented top-secret crash program. Four years later, the Soviet Union stunned the world by testing an atomic bomb of its own. Now through never-before-seen interviews, NOVA uncovers the secret of the Soviets' sudden atomic success. This program takes viewers inside one of the most extraordinary decryption breakthroughs in history—VENONA, which in 1943 began probing the seemingly unbreakable Soviet code for a loophole.

NOVA interviews several surviving officials involved with VENONA, including crack code breaker Meredith Gardner, who explains how he exploited Soviet mistakes to uncover their atom spy ring, and retired FBI agent Robert Lamphere, who worked with Gardner to identify spies. Together they exposed a vast network of spies operating in the United States, including highly placed agents at the clandestine facility in Los Alamos, New Mexico, where the atomic bomb was designed and built.

VENONA (a meaningless code name) is now forcing scholars to reassess the entire history of the Cold War, in which spying inside the most sensitive branches of the US government and military played a more significant role than many experts believed. Among the US agents revealed by VENONA was Los Alamos scientist Klaus Fuchs, who was tried and convicted for espionage in the early 1950s based on his confession under questioning. Meanwhile, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were prosecuted as the leaders of the Soviet atom spy ring and executed in 1953, despite evidence from VENONA that they played only a minor role in the loss of atomic secrets.

NOVA reveals that Los Alamos scientist Ted Hall was also identified by VENONA, but never confessed and managed to escape prosecution, even though his espionage gave the Soviets the all-important key to designing their first nuclear weapon. Hall was never publicly accused by the government since it was reluctant to expose VENONA by using decrypts as evidence in court. Hall comes clean about his spying activities in a never-before-seen interview recorded shortly before his death from cancer in 1999. His wife, Joan, also recounts—for the first time on television—the tale of his treachery and the cat-and-mouse game he and she played with the FBI, as it unsuccessfully tried to maneuver Hall into self-incrimination.

The VENONA operation was far from straightforward. But even as Gardner and others were providing a windfall of intelligence data, spies with knowledge of VENONA alerted the Soviets, who promptly changed their system and rendered VENONA useless against later messages. However, VENONA stayed in business for decades, unraveling the complex spy network that operated in the United States in the 1940s and allowing authorities to gauge the extent to which American secrets had been compromised.

NOVA.

CREDITS

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