The Project Y Spies
An Historical Perspective on a Perennial Threat

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Hollywood Spies are Easy to Identify
But What About Real Spies?
The Race for the Atomic Bomb

• Fission was first produced in Nazi Germany in 1938
• Einstein and Szilard warned President Roosevelt in August 1939
• On September 1, 1939 Germany invaded Poland
• Imperial Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941
• Los Alamos, led by J. Robert Oppenheimer, held its first major technical conference in April 1943
• Two types of atomic bombs were completed in ~28 months
• The world’s first nuclear test was conducted on July 16, 1945: Trinity
• It achieved a yield equivalent to 21,000 tons of TNT
The End of World War II

• Hiroshima was attacked on August 6, 1945; ~64,500 deaths by mid-November 1945
• The Soviet Union declared war on Japan August 8th; invaded Manchuria on the 9th
• Nagasaki was bombed on August 9th; 39,214 deaths by mid-November 1945
• An armistice was declared on August 14th
• Los Alamos received the Army-Navy “E” Award on October 16th

“The group [of Japanese diplomats in Switzerland] believes that the atomic bomb, not the Soviet entry into the war in the Pacific, caused the Japanese offer to surrender.”

– Walter J. Donovan (OSS Director) to President Harry S. Truman, August 14th
But meanwhile, behind the scenes...
The Boy Genius: Ted Hall

- Hall was born October 20, 1925 in New York City
- He graduated from Harvard in 1944 at age 18!
- He arrived in Los Alamos January 27, 1944; worked in the Physics Division then the Gadget Division (P-6 to G-6)
- Hall voluntarily shared classified information with the Communist Party of America in October 1944
- Initially, Soviet intelligence was highly suspicious of him
- Likely code-named “MLAD,” Hall was the first to provide the Soviets with information directly from Site Y
The Brilliant Ingrate: Klaus Fuchs

- Fuchs was born December 29, 1911 in Rüsselsheim, Germany
- After Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany, he fled to Britain
- He completed his PhD at the University of Bristol in 1937
- Fuchs became a British subject in 1942 after a lengthy internment
- He was recruited by Rudolf Peierls, a fellow German refugee, for Britain’s atomic bomb program
- Like Hall, Fuchs volunteered to spy
- His code-name was “CHARLES”
- As a senior theoretical physicist, Fuchs had access to very sensitive information
David Greenglass: Oh Brother!

- Greenglass was born March 2, 1922 in New York City
- He joined the Young Communist League in 1943 with his wife Ruth; he joined the Army that same year
- He was assigned to the Manhattan Project because of his machinist training
- Greenglass was recruited as a spy by his brother-in-law Julius Rosenberg
- Code-named “KALIBR,” he was a “semi-skilled” Technician 4th Class in X-4
- The information Greenglass provided was not particularly useful
- However, it did help corroborate information provided by other spies
• Seborer was born in (you guessed it!) **New York City** in 1921
• He arrived in December 1944; a PFC in X-2C, which becomes X-5
• He participated in Project Trinity; he helped with the 100-ton test
• He was promoted to T/5 in the spring and T/4 in the summer
• After the war, he was transferred to Z Division (Z ultimately became Sandia)
• Seborer was almost certainly a spy; his code-name was almost certainly “GODSEND”
• He apparently transferred information to a communist attorney for Amtorg

“Manley and I would greatly appreciate having Seborer return to Manley’s group on or before June 15, as he will be extremely valuable to Manley.”

– Kenneth Bainbridge, Trinity Test Director
Who Was Perseus?

• For decades, there was an alleged wartime spy at Los Alamos code-named PERSEUS
• The evidence of PERSEUS’s existence indicates s/he was associated with Morris and Lona Cohen
• Memoirs written by former members of the KGB after the Cold War have alluded to PERSEUS
• Today, supported by VENONA, the prevailing view is that PERSEUS never existed

“But with the opening of the Venona decrypts in 1995, it became clear that Perseus was a Soviet/Russian intelligence disinformation operation to protect Theodore Hall (the real Mlad), then still alive but not publicly exposed as a Soviet spy. The fake Perseus/Mlad was given characteristics that did not fit Hall. There was no Perseus.”

– Historians Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes
The Atomic Legacy of the Project Y Spies

• The Soviet Union secretly tested its first atomic bomb on August 29, 1949
• The Soviets had exceptionally talented scientists, but the atomic spies were also very much responsible for RDS-1/Joe-1
• The detailed information acquired through espionage enabled the Soviets to copy the imploding plutonium weapon: Fat Man
• However, information acquired on the H-bomb was of no value

“The whole Soviet people should be deeply grateful to Klaus Fuchs for the vast amount of information he provided Soviet physicists.”

-Yuli Khariton
Why Does it Matter?

- The atomic spies helped one of history’s most prolific mass murderers acquire atomic weapons!
- Remember: Stalin enabled Hitler to conquer Western Europe
- In addition to killing millions of his own people, Stalin also invaded and/or annexed the following:
  - Poland, Finland, Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina, Hertza, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia
- Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons prematurely accelerated the arms race
- The U.S. stockpile grew from 13 weapons in 1947 to nearly 1,200 at the time of Stalin’s death (1953)
Exploring Common Threads

• There are some similarities between Hall, Fuchs, Greenglass, and Seborer
• Three were very young soldiers from New York City
• Two were very young soldiers from New York City who were X Division T/4s!
• Each spy was more zealous than knowledgeable
• Each spy refused to acknowledge the absolutely vile nature of the Soviet Union
• Each spy was motivated primarily, if not exclusively, by ideology

EACH SPY WAS GIVEN ACCESS TO CLASSIFIED INFORMATION!
Epilogue
The Amateur Without Regrets

- Hall completed his PhD in physics after the war
- He later left physics altogether and became a biologist
- He married and had three daughters
- Intelligence analysts discovered Hall was likely MLAD via the VENONA program and the Vassiliev notebooks
- He was questioned in March 1951, but released to protect VENONA
- Hall admitted he was a spy in 1996
- He claimed fear of a U.S. monopoly motivated him to commit espionage
- Hall died of cancer on Nov. 1, 1999

“I was indeed mistaken about some things, in particular my view of the nature of the Soviet state. The world has moved on a lot since then, and certainly so have I. But in essence, from the perspective of my 71 years, I still think that brash youth had the right end of the stick. I am no longer that person, but I am by no means ashamed of him.” – Ted Hall
Doctor Oblivious

• Fuchs returned to Britain several months after the war
• He stole (essentially useless) information on the hydrogen bomb after the war
• He was identified in 1949 and arrested the following year
• Fuchs confessed to espionage and implicated his courier, Harry Gold, who implicated David Greenglass
• He served 9 years in prison, then immigrated to East Germany in 1959
• Upon his return, he married and became deputy director of a research institute
• Fuchs died January 28, 1988, less than two years before the Berlin wall fell

“It was always my intention, when I had helped the Soviets take over everything, to get up and tell them what is wrong with their system.” – Klaus Fuchs

“I have never before known a person who possesses such a marvelous ability to think in abstract terms who is at the same time so helpless when it comes to either observe or evaluate reality.” – anonymous East German physicist as quoted by Rolf Landshoff

“I can say that I really know America and the West. And I do know that [Soviet nuclear testing] is the only way to curb them.” – Klaus Fuchs
After his arrest in June 1950, Greenglass implicated Julius Rosenberg.

He testified in 1951 that his sister, Julius’ wife Ethel, also participated (which she did!)

In exchange for his testimony, Greenglass only served nine years in prison and the government agreed not to indict his wife.

Julius and Ethel died in the electric chair on June 19, 1953.

After his release, Greenglass lived with his family under an assumed name.

He recanted his testimony in 1996 and falsely claimed his sister was innocent.

On July 1, 2014 Greenglass died with, apparently, no regrets.

“As a spy who turned his family in, I don’t care. I sleep very well. I would not sacrifice my wife and my children for my sister...You know, I seldom use the word sister anymore; I’ve just wiped it out of my mind.”

- David Greenglass
After the war, Seborer obtained an MA in electrical engineering from Michigan.

He was hired by the Navy, but resigned June 1, 1951.

A month later, he fled the country and never returned.

In late summer 1955, an FBI informant became aware of Seborer’s espionage.

In 1964, Seborer (who had immigrated to the USSR with his brother) was awarded the Order of the Red Star.

He died April 23, 2015 in Moscow.

Klehr and Haynes broke the story of Seborer’s treachery in September 2019.
Thank you