

Communism, Espionage, and the Cold War

A Unit of Study for Grades 9–12



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Teacher Materials

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

Communism, Espionage, and the Cold War makes use of documents available for the first time since the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union. These documents shed light on aspects of the Cold War that up to now have been based on a limited documentary record. In addition to sources from the former Soviet Union, the most significant source of documents comes from the deciphered cables of the Venona Project, a top secret United States Army Signal Intelligence Service program to read Soviet diplomatic cablegrams. These “reveal that hundreds of Americans had formal ties to Soviet intelligence services in the 1930s and 1940s” (*Venona*, 331).

First, the unit examines the fear of communism as a threat to national security post-World War II as it was first played out in the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) based on testimonies such as that of Elizabeth Bentley (**Lesson One**). **Lesson Two** then explores how Joseph McCarthy played on that fear creating an accusatory atmosphere that became known as McCarthyism. Through use of the Venona Project documents, **Lesson Three** looks at intelligence methods, an integral part of the Cold War especially when examining the espionage efforts of the Soviet Union in the United States. **Lessons Four and Five** cover two famous espionage cases of the period: Alger Hiss and the corresponding testimony of ex-communist Whittaker Chambers’s testimony and the trial and subsequent execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Though the communist Soviet Union (USSR) was a temporary ally of the United States during World War II, the alliance was a tentative one that soon dissolved as the war was ending. In August, 1945, the same month that atomic bombs were dropped and Japan surrendered unconditionally, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) had their first interview with confessed former communist Elizabeth Bentley. By November 1948 she had submitted a 112-page confession implicating many others in espionage for the Soviets. Though it would take some time for the investigation of the named individuals, the event was emblematic of the fact that by the late 1940s the Soviet Union and the United States had again become ideological opponents engaged in an arms and technological race while striving to gain political, economic, social, and cultural dominance in the world. This all-but-military rivalry became known as the “Cold War.” The early phases of the Cold War are usually depicted as a “second red scare.” The “first red scare” had followed the Russian Revolution and World War I when a series of strikes and bombings caused many Americans to become convinced that communism in the homeland was a real and immediate threat. Following the bombing of his home and the subsequent death of his chauffeur, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer launched a series of raids on suspected radicals.

Much of the story of the early years of the Cold War and the renewed fear of communism, especially on American home soil, has focused on Joseph McCarthy and “McCarthyism” as symbolic of the attempts to ferret out communist sympathizers and spies in the United States. However, McCarthy only became prominent in February, 1950. Two years earlier, President Harry S. Truman had already instituted the Federal Loyalty Program (a way to test the political sympathies of federal employees) and the HUAC had moved their focus away from the Ku-Klux-Klan to investigation of domestic communist activity based on the late-1945 confessions of former communist Elizabeth Bentley. Alger Hiss, a former State Department official, was convicted of perjury in January 1950. Only then did McCarthy come to the forefront, claiming in several speeches that he knew of varying

numbers of government officials who were communists. His accusations were investigated by the Tydings Committee which voted down party lines that they were without basis. He was not involved, for example, in the espionage trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1951, but as a result of McCarthy's continued outspoken ways, the efforts to purge communism from American society and government became known as "McCarthyism." McCarthy's own accusations continued until his censure from Congress in 1954 following his conduct during the Army-McCarthy hearings.

How justified was the fear of communism? Ever present in issues of homeland security, the impact on civil liberties of McCarthyism and the various investigative efforts of congressional committees is weighed against the actual severity of the threat of communism in the United States during the Cold War as well as the nature of the communist threat on the international stage.

For example, Ellen Schrecker, who is critical of McCarthyism, contends there was a "demonizing of communism" and that "the Communist party did not provoke the repression visited upon it." Further, "the threat [of Communism] was grossly exaggerated, but it was not a total fantasy" (Schrecker, 3). Those who disagree point to the espionage efforts of American Communists as evidence that there was validity in being anti-Communist and that what to some would seem to be "repression" could also be seen as a legitimate effort to bring traitors to justice. In recent years, scholars like Arthur Herman and popular authors such as Ann Coulter have mounted a vigorous defense and reassessment of the investigations led by McCarthy and others.

The late 1990s public release of intelligence related to Soviet espionage in the United States (the Venona Project) as well as limited access to former KGB files has allowed for a re-examination of the evidence pertaining to both the accused spies and their accusers.

Using KGB archive files made available to them, historian Allen Weinstein and former KGB intelligence agent, Alexander Vassiliev conclude that "despite later denials, the truth is that a number of American agents and sources, some from doctrinal devotion and others for cold cash, carried on espionage for Soviet operatives throughout the New Deal and war years. Because of their work, Russian intelligence agencies received substantial and sometimes critical information (including many classified documents) concerning U.S. government policies on highly sensitive subjects, its confidential negotiating strategies, and secret weapons developments, including essential processes involved in building the atomic bomb" (Weinstein and Vassiliev, 343).

Sources: Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994), p. 3; Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev, *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America—The Stalin Era* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. 343.

Overview Questions for the Entire Unit:

- What was the real nature of the Communist threat during the Cold War?
- How significant a role did Americans play in Soviet espionage conducted in the United States?
- Who were the specific Americans involved in Soviet espionage in the United States?
- How serious was the threat of Communism as a result of Soviet espionage in the United States?
- What was the extent of the Soviet infiltration of United States government agencies?
- What was the nature of the efforts to investigate the extent of communist involvement in American life?

III. UNIT CONTEXT

The context for this unit is, naturally, the Cold War. However, it is not an effort to delve into the causes of the Cold War or for that matter to assign blame. It is based upon the existence of hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union, even during the years of World War II when the two nations were allies. Because of this hostility, the Soviet Union conducted espionage in the United States. Of course, the United States also carried out espionage during this period, but the unique feature of Soviet espionage was the extent of the involvement of American citizens who acted as agents for the Soviet Union and the enormous scope of the intelligence involved. There was no comparable involvement by Soviet citizens engaged in espionage on behalf of the United States. The nature and extent of American involvement has been heatedly debated by historians.

While the primary focus of this unit is the Cold War era, it will be helpful to consider aspects of a much larger context. The motivation for the involvement of some Americans in espionage for the Soviet Union must also be understood in the context of the economic upheavals of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Some Americans at that time came to believe that Communism was a solution to the economic problems they attributed to capitalism; their commitment to Communist ideology was a factor in their willingness to engage in espionage for the Soviet Union. Soviet espionage reached its height during World War II. During the late 1930s, many Americans identified Communism with anti-fascism. The Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, which many anti-fascists saw as a “pact with the devil,” caused a considerable number of Communists to leave the party. However, as documents in this unit demonstrate, the wartime alliance with the USSR and its staunch resistance to Nazism following Germany’s invasion of the USSR in 1940, convinced some United States government officials and scientists to turn over American secrets, including details of the atomic bomb, to the USSR.

Although Senator Joseph McCarthy has come to be a symbol of the Cold War in the United States, he was a relatively short-lived figure on the political scene. While the identification of the struggle against domestic communism with McCarthy has enabled students to put a face on history, it has also limited the scope of the inquiry into a number of significant aspects of the Cold War. Sometimes events are erroneously connected to McCarthy. For example, students may think McCarthy was involved in the various investigations of Hollywood personalities.

The material in this unit is designed to guide students to evaluate the post-World War II threat of Communism to homeland security in the United States by introducing some examples of newly released intelligence from the period. Students are introduced to two of the spy cases, Alger Hiss and the Rosenbergs, and given the opportunity to consider the personalities involved as well as samples of the actual intelligence. Students are guided to make inferences and to develop historical perspectives about homeland security, intelligence, and spies.

IV. CORRELATION WITH THE NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR UNITED STATES HISTORY

This unit furthers students’ understanding of “the international origins and domestic consequences of the Cold War,” fulfilling Standard 2A of Era 9: Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s), specifically, evaluating the “flawed peace’ resulting from World War II” and the resultant advent of nuclear politics.”

In addition to the standards that deal with the Cold War era, *Communism, Espionage, and the Cold War* allows students to develop different perspectives on the Standards relating to the 1930s and the Great Depression. For Era 8: The Great Depression and World War II (1929–1945), Standard 1 provides an overview: “Students should understand: the causes of the Great Depression and how it affected

American society.” More specifically, **Standard 1B** indicates “Students should be able to: Demonstrate understanding of how American life changed during the depression years.” Some Americans embraced the beliefs of Communism and rejected Capitalism. The role of these ideological changes in the willingness of some Americans to commit espionage for the Soviet Union is an interesting question for students to consider. “How justified were such actions?” becomes the basis for a possible debate among students.

The unit also addresses **Historical Thinking Standard 3**, “Historical Analysis and Interpretation,” guiding students to (A) “formulate questions to focus their inquiry and analysis;”(B) “compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions;”(E) “compare different stories about a historical figure, era, or event and analyze the different portrayals or perspectives they present;”and (G) “Consider multiple perspectives in the records of human experience y demonstrating how their differing motives, beliefs, interests, hopes, and fears influenced individual and group behaviors.”

V. UNIT OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To analyze, draw inferences, and develop generalizations from a variety of documentary sources.
- ◆ To examine the role Elizabeth Bentley played in the investigation of the extent of Soviet espionage in the United States.
- ◆ To analyze conflicting viewpoints about Senator Joseph McCarthy and his actions during the Cold War.
- ◆ To examine the nature of McCarthyism, its rise and demise, and its significance within the context of the Cold War and the existence of Soviet espionage.
- ◆ To examine the Venona Project and the methods used to decipher secret coded cipher messages.
- ◆ To assess the documentary record in order to determine the extent of Soviet espionage in the United States and the identification of specific American participants.
- ◆ To analyze two of the dramatic episodes of the Cold War: (1) The Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers case; (2) The Julius and Ethel Rosenberg case

VI. LESSON PLANS

1. Investigating Communism: The House Un-American Activities Committee and Elizabeth Bentley
2. Investigating Communism: Joseph McCarthy and McCarthyism
3. The Evidence of Communist Espionage: The Venona Project and KGB Files
4. Communism on Trial: Whittaker Chamber and the Alger Hiss Case
5. Communism on Trial: Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and Atomic Espionage