

Scoping Out the International Spy Museum

Ronald Radosh

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The International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C.—a private museum that opened in July 2002 at the cost of \$40 million—is rated as one of the most visited and popular tourist destinations in our nation’s capital, despite stiff competition from the various public museums that are part of the Smithsonian. The popularity of the Spy Museum has a great deal to do with how espionage has been portrayed in the popular culture, especially in the movies. Indeed, the museum pays homage to cinema with its display of the first Aston Martin used by James Bond, when Agent 007 was played by Sean Connery in the films made during the JFK years.

The Spy Museum’s board of directors includes Peter Earnest, a former CIA operative and the museum’s first chief executive; David Kahn, the analyst of cryptology; Gen. Oleg Kalugin, a former KGB agent; as well as R. James Woolsey, a former director of the CIA. Clearly, the board intends that in addition to the museum’s considerable entertainment value, its exhibits and texts convey a sense of the reality of the spy’s life and the historical context in which espionage agents operated.

The day I toured the museum it was filled with high school students who stood at the various exhibits taking copious notes. It was obvious that before their visit the students had been told to see what the exhibits could teach them about topics discussed in either their history or social studies classes. So, what the museum teaches is, as its creators intended, meant to be taken

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seriously. In a period where polls show that fewer and fewer students are learning about American history, the educational importance of the Spy Museum has even greater value than once might have been the case.

As the Cold War era fades further away in time, the Spy Museum might be—until Francis Gary Powers, Jr.’s, proposed Cold War Museum opens in a few years in Lorton, Virginia—the single repository of information exposing the public to the causes and events that enveloped the world from 1945 through the fall of communism.

It is true that documentaries have been made that seek to give the public an overview of the period. The most ambitious of these was a twenty-four episode CNN series that aired in the 1990s and spanned over ten hours. At the time, as many readers will recall, the documentary was treated very critically by numerous reviewers, including me, who pointed to the theme of “moral equivalence” that dominated the narrative, and faulted its producers for implying that the Soviet Union and the United States were not only equally responsible for the years of conflict, but also used similar immoral means to gain victory. In effect, the documentary’s producers were equating the Soviet gulag and the millions killed during the Soviet years with the impact in America of the rather historically short era of McCarthyism, during which the supposed American victims suffered a fate, viewers were informed, comparable to Stalin’s victims. For this reason, it is important to see the way in which the Spy Museum treats the Cold War. Of course, most of the museum is dedicated to showing the so-called “tools of the trade” used by spies. These include instructions for creating a false identity, disguises, and paraphernalia (hidden cameras, bugs for recording, and how to carry out a “dead drop,” a location used to pass items secretly between two people, without requiring them to meet), and a history of spying through the ages. These exhibits provide constant fascination and are the ones that draw the crowds.

But it is to the museum’s credit that the directors use these fascinating exhibits to reveal how important espionage was and is to carrying out policy, and how crucial it can be to a nation’s success in conducting foreign policy. It also instructs on what happens when a country turns inward to hunt for those it deems are domestic enemies.

Major attention, therefore, is given to the creation of the Cheka—“The Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage”—which Vladimir Ilyich Lenin established after the founding

of the Soviet state in 1917. In a room set up to resemble the office of Feliks Dzerzhinsky, the Cheka's first chief, the museum's explanatory text indicates, without ambiguity, that the Cheka's purpose was to perfect the art of terror as the main mechanism for defeating what Lenin and the Bolsheviks believed were the regime's many enemies. In large letters surrounding one wall of the room, it quotes Dzerzhinsky as publicly saying: "We stand for organized terror." The exhibit's text further notes that during the USSR's existence, the Cheka and its successor organizations, the NKVD, the MVB, and finally the KGB, put to death more than ten million Soviet citizens. Dzerzhinsky's recreated office contains a replica of his desk, his telephone, and a door that the interrogated citizen thought was an exit, but turned out to be a passageway to the Lubyanka prison.

Dzerzhinsky's terror began, exhibit visitors are informed, after the attempted assassination of Lenin by a member of the Social-Revolutionary (SR) Party. Those arrested included members of the old opposition parties, SR's, anarchists, social-democrats, Mensheviks, and representatives of moderate "bourgeois" parties, not only former Czarists and white Russians. During Stalin's fierce reign of terror, the exhibit text informs, thousands were falsely identified as spies, traitors, saboteurs, or "parasites," and hence tortured and forced to confess in staged judicial trials like the famed purges in 1937 and 1938. The exhibit text reads: "Executing millions during the 1921–1953 'Red Terror,' State Security eliminated opponents while spreading fear to discourage dissent."

Bringing the exhibits closer to the present, the Spy Museum has a special section on espionage conducted by the United States against the so-called German Democratic Republic, or DDR, in East Germany during the Cold War. The public can walk through a replica of the famous underground tunnel dug by Western spies that went under DDR territory. It turns out that the Soviets were well aware of it, making it completely ineffective. Another exhibit features a model of an East German car built to contain hidden sections in the engine block, under the trunk, and elsewhere, where Germans hid in a desperate bid to be driven across the border to freedom in the West.

Exhibit text also describes the practices of the East German State Security, the infamous STASI, which built up a secret service that far exceeded the reach and power of the Nazi's feared Gestapo. Postwar Berlin, the public is informed, was the center of Cold War espionage in Europe. These exhibits,

however, are sparse in comparison to those at the STASI Museum now open in Berlin, which occupies the actual building that served as STASI headquarters during the Cold War. (Those interested in this museum can read my article about it, with accompanying photos, in www.pajamasmedia.com/ronradosh/2009/11/20/the-reality-of-the-stasi-state-in-east-germany.)

The heart of the museum's treatment of the role of the United States at home during these pivotal years during the Cold War, however, is more problematic. Given that the public has already been made acquainted with the brutal reality of Stalin's regime, it is somewhat surprising to find that, like the CNN documentary, the International Spy Museum also dabbles in its own version of moral equivalence.

In a section devoted to the famous atomic spies, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg and Ethel's brother David Greenglass, a brief sketch outlines the basics of the case, noting that the Rosenbergs were found guilty and executed, while the cooperative Greenglass received a fifteen-year sentence. Also featured are photos and short summaries of other famous personalities who engaged in the espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union carried out by people like Alger Hiss.

As *Academic Questions* readers know, the continuing release of evidence from the once-secret Venona decrypts—the messages of KGB Central in Moscow to its agents in the United States—have shown that the Rosenbergs, Alger Hiss, Harry Dexter White, and many others once viewed as falsely accused victims of McCarthyism were all guilty of working for the KGB. More recently, in *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America* (Yale University Press, 2009), John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Alexander Vasseliev offer definitive and documented evidence, based on actual KGB documents previously unavailable, of the extent of Soviet infiltration into the highest ranks of the U.S. government. This book also contains new documentation pertaining to Hiss, the Rosenbergs, journalist I.F. Stone, and many others.

It would have been good if its staff sought to update the museum's somewhat outdated text in this section to include material revealed in *Spies*, as well as to offer more documentation from the Venona decrypts to which the museum text refers. This would have established that the Soviets posed a very real threat to American national security during the Cold War era, and that paying attention to this was not an irrational act based on unfounded fears.

There was a lot wrong with the tactics used by J. Edgar Hoover, who held sway over the FBI for far too many years, and disgraced the agency he ran until his death in 1972 with his vendetta against Martin Luther King, Jr., among other travesties. Reading the text on Hoover at the museum, however, one might incorrectly conclude that everything he did was unnecessary, and that all those he viewed as threats were simply people who dissented from the official view of Cold War Washington.

The following, for example, appears in one key museum text:

As the Cold War pitted the United States and its Allies against the Soviet bloc, many Americans equated “Communist” with “enemy agent.” Unconventional views became un-American views. In this undercover war, people worried that an invisible foe lurked everywhere and feared a “Red” under every bed. Hoover used the recurring specter of Communism to solidify his own power and influence....Given the tenor of the times, no one was above suspicion.

And if this language is not bad enough, the text goes on to make another completely incorrect and erroneous historical judgment, one regularly stated as fact by the most extreme left-wing elements in the United States:

Some spies were uncovered in the process, but history has shown that most of the accused were innocent, their lives and reputations destroyed by the Communist witch-hunt.

In fact, virtually everyone accused by Elizabeth Bentley—a major KGB operative who turned in 1945 and on her own reported on her spy activities and contacts to the FBI—has been proven by Venona and other KGB records to have been KGB agents. Known as the “Blonde Spy Queen” and portrayed as an alcoholic fantasist, Bentley later publicly testified against those she accused before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and at many trials. For example, the now-forgotten William Remington, once depicted by liberals as a martyr because common thugs killed him in prison, was widely proclaimed innocent of the charges Bentley levied against him before the HUAC and at his trial. In reality, Remington was a secret Communist who passed vital military information to the Soviets, as Bentley testified. If a visitor were to take the Spy Museum text at face value, he would think that America in the 1950s was just like Soviet Russia, where

indeed, virtually every family had one member who had been arrested and never seen again. The truth was that most people were never under suspicion, and that most of those who took the Fifth Amendment and refused to testify about their political affiliations before HUAC were in fact secret Communists. Similarly, most of those who were accused of and denied being KGB agents were in fact guilty.

A most telling example of this is Cedric Belfrage, a British subject who worked for the security service commonly known as MI-5 and lived in the United States. During the Cold War, Belfrage founded what became an influential pro-Communist newsweekly, *The National Guardian*. It was this publication that started the American campaign on behalf of the Rosenbergs and ran articles arguing that they were the innocent victims of a witch-hunt simply because they were opposed to President Truman's foreign policy and were Jewish, and therefore deserved executive clemency. As it turned out, the new material in *Spies* confirms that Belfrage was a bona fide KGB operative, and that his paper carried out the campaign according to instructions developed by the KGB in Moscow. Yet before he died, Belfrage had the nerve to write a book he titled *The American Inquisition, 1945–1960: A Profile of the "McCarthy Era"* (Thunder's Mouth Press, 1989), in which he argued that the hunt for spies was all paranoia.

One hopes that the Spy Museum will decide to update its interpretation of the American side of the Cold War. As it stands, exhibits still contain textual material that in fact contradicts what appears in the *International Spy Museum Souvenir Book* (\$12.00; also sold online), which was obviously published more recently than the exhibit texts. In the section titled "Spies of the Cold War," the book notes more accurately than the exhibit text that Venona and other documents "clearly showed that the Rosenbergs and many others accused of espionage had been *guilty as charged*, victims of the passions of the Cold War" (emphasis added).

The souvenir book, however, contains its own errors, which indicates that the museum staff who prepare exhibit text as well as its own publications need a more knowledgeable historian among the ranks. The book actually refers to Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the Bolshevik Revolution's leader, as Nikolai Lenin. Of course, Lenin's actual last name was Ulyanov; Lenin was the name he adopted, supposedly after a river he once stayed near. He may early in his exile have used the initial "N" before Lenin in a pamphlet he issued, and some say a reporter, seeing that, assumed his name was Nikolai. But today,

when no one makes that mistake, it is more than an egregious error that it appears in a Spy Museum official publication.

If the directors make an effort to keep exhibit and print material current, eradicate ambiguities on the historical import of Soviet espionage in the United States, and avoid mixing common liberal shibboleths with other information that indicates a serious threat of Soviet espionage did exist that had to be addressed, it will bring the International Spy Museum up to par and up to date. It will then merit the attention of crowds of visitors who can be informed while they are obviously being entertained.

The International Spy Museum Responds

Thank you very much for giving us an opportunity to comment on Ronald Radosh's write-up about the International Spy Museum. We appreciate his positive review of the museum noting our emphasis on education. However, we would like to specifically address his concern over our treatment of the U.S. during the Cold War as "problematic" and dabbling "in its own version of moral equivalence." The main support cited for his concern is "one key museum text," as excerpted below from his article:

As the Cold War pitted the United States and its Allies against the Soviet bloc, many Americans equated "Communist" with "enemy agent." Unconventional views became un-American views. In this undercover war, people worried that an invisible foe lurked everywhere and feared a "Red" under every bed. Hoover used the recurring specter of Communism to solidify his own power and influence....Given the tenor of the times, no one was above suspicion.

And if this language is not bad enough, the text goes on to make another completely incorrect and erroneous historical judgment, one regularly stated as fact by the most extreme left-wing elements in the United States:

Some spies were uncovered in the process, but history has shown that most of the accused were innocent, their lives and reputations destroyed by the Communist witch-hunt.

Given *Academic Questions's* stated dedication to integrity and scholarly standards, we know you will be as surprised as we were to see that Mr. Radosh's

critique is based on a label that does not actually exist in the museum, but on one that he himself fabricated by cutting and pasting from three completely separate labels! Enclosed are the three labels in their entirety from which he lifted lines of text (highlighted in italics) to create his own “new” label, claiming that it is ours. I think you would agree that taking sentences out of context and distorting them in this way and then alleging bias on our part is grossly unfair. By reading these three labels separately as they were designed, you can judge for yourself whether we have failed to be accurate and objective. Moreover, these are just three of more than thirty-two labels in this section.

Mr. Radosh makes the associated point that our labels do not clearly establish that the Soviets posed a very real threat to America. While the museum may not cover the Venona decrypts to the extent that Mr. Radosh would like, contrary to his statement, we do make this point explicit—see the fourth label enclosed. And as Mr. Radosh may have limited museum experience he may be unaware of the difficulty of making constant changes in exhibitions with every brand new publication that appears.

Again, we sincerely appreciate the opportunity you have provided us to respond. While we take issue with other points in Mr. Radosh’s article, our most serious objection is with his use of his fabricated label as the basis for the claim of bias on our part. We appreciate that the National Association of Scholars takes its responsibility for ensuring accuracy seriously—as seriously as the International Spy Museum takes its credibility as a museum and educational institution. Through our permanent exhibit and a very active series of programs for adults, students, and educators we attempt to present the latest and most accurate information to help raise public awareness about this most important government function bearing on national security.

Thank you again for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Peter Earnest
Executive Director

Suspicious Minds

Confronting “The Red Menace”

America shuddered when the Soviet Union became a nuclear power in 1949. The United States, alarmed that its atomic secrets had been stolen, reacted

with determination and panic, with justified vigilance and often irrational fear.

As the Cold War pitted the U.S. and its allies against the Soviet bloc, many Americans equated “Communist” with “enemy agent.” Unconventional views became un-American views. In this undercover war, people worried that a largely invisible foe might lurk anywhere and feared a “Red” under every bed.

International Spy Profile

Name: John Edgar Hoover

Years of active service: 1924–1972

Country of origin: United States

J. Edgar Hoover served as director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) from 1924 until his death in 1972. Throughout his tenure, he established himself as America’s leading foe of Communists and subversives, zealously tracking suspected spies.

Hoover’s career spanned the “red scares” that followed both World Wars. *He used this recurring specter of Communists in the government to solidify his own political power and influence.* Important Soviet spies were caught by Hoover’s FBI, but often hysterical accusations ruined innocent lives.

Un-American Activities?

The Red Menace

Usually identified with Senator Joseph McCarthy, The House Committee on Un-American Activities was established by Congress to search out and identify Communists. Public hearings provided Americans with a daily dose of drama, fear, and suspicion. Hundreds of suspected Communists testified—among them Hollywood actors, writers, and politicians. Given the tenor of the times, no one was above suspicion.

Some spies were uncovered in the process, but history has shown that most of the accused were innocent, their lives and reputations destroyed by the Communist witch-hunt.

The Venona Papers

Exposed!

Even after their conviction, many people believed the Rosenbergs and others were innocent. Top secret Soviet diplomatic cables deciphered at Arlington Hall proved otherwise. The intercepted cables—the Venona papers—named Soviet spies including Julius Rosenberg and Alger Hiss. However, making Venona public would have risked the entire operation, and so prosecutors could not use the cables as evidence in court. Nonetheless, the cables provided the FBI and other Justice Department officials with the sure knowledge that they were prosecuting genuine Soviet agents.

Public doubt was removed in 1995, when the Venona papers were finally declassified. The messages reveal both the extent of Soviet espionage against the U.S. and the critical role of code breaking in counterintelligence.

The National Security Agency has declassified Venona in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act. Over 3,000 Venona-related messages are now public.

Ronald Radosh Replies

Peter Earnest does protest too much. My review of the International Spy Museum is a positive one, as I think anyone who reads it can see. Yet, a little bit of well deserved criticism is evidently something he cannot accept.

Rather than show that I misquoted actual words on display at the museum, he writes that the “label,” as he calls the words I quote, “does not actually exist.” I not only copied it in handwriting, but taped it and played the tape back to make sure the words were accurate. He then writes that I cut and pasted words from three different labels.

I never wrote that the words were from one specific label. The importance is that these words are on their display—and they convey a false impression. I repeat, they are accurately quoted in my article, something Mr. Earnest does not deny. Indeed, in the supposedly in-context excerpts he presents, my own point is actually confirmed. Take “Suspicious Minds.” I did not quote the first paragraph, which again offers moral equivalence: i.e., the U.S. “reacted

with determination and panic, with justified vigilance and often irrational fear.” Really? This is the kind of meaningless sentence meant to satisfy all sides, rather than historical truth. Similarly, the other excerpts he presents reveal only the accuracy of my analysis.

I apologize for not quoting the Venona label, which, as he says, is one of the best and most accurate. The problem, which I hope museum goers will notice, is that it contradicts the assertions I cite in the other labels.

The sentences stand by themselves. They are not out of context. Moreover, it turns out that in fact I do have museum experience. My wife ran a historical consulting firm in New York City that got the contract for many historical museum exhibits, some of which I actually wrote the text for. I do know that it is difficult to make changes each time a new book comes out.

However, when a statement is allowed to appear that gives a false and incorrect historical impression, it is important that such a statement be corrected as soon as possible. If Mr. Earnest is sincere that they want to “present the latest and most accurate information” then he should see to it that these important changes be made.

Finally, since he did not mention it, I assume that he is also embarrassed about the reference in the museum’s book to N. Lenin.