

Ethics of a Cold War Spy

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There are plenty of fanciful notions about spies. Movies and suspenseful novels leave their audiences enthralled in a world of danger, suspense, friendship, romance, and loyalty. But where is the line between reality and fiction? Certainly not every American citizen who has committed espionage against the United States had a made-for-the-big-screen lifestyle. In fact, very few did. In part, these romanticized notions of spies and their characters arose during the Cold War as a result of the many public accusations and trials against them and other Communist Party sympathizers. In an era defined by a deep-rooted nationalism—those identified as sympathetic, or worse, active in aiding the “other,” were quickly alienated and disgraced. Considering the risk, what would have motivated a spy to commit treason against his or her country during an era defined by its national pride?

The Cold War, which is commonly thought to have begun in 1945, was the imminent clash between two of the world’s largest superpowers at the time—the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the United States. The Cold War marked a period of ideological warfare that posed communism versus capitalism.¹ Both sides knew that in order to become the number-one superpower they would need intelligence and information, enough to give them the edge over the other. Hence, both sides resorted to the use of espionage as a way to subvert the other. According to scholars, espionage is both an “art and a science,” a weapon that is an absolute necessity for all governments. The USSR and the United States realized that the ability to seek information for any infinite number of reasons, and in turn, to use it to their advantage—was a primary source of power.² But first, a government must plant, turn, or infiltrate individuals who have access to relevant information;

this person must then be willing to turn that information over to the opposing country. These individuals are spies.

Scholars have debated the ethical and moral motivations of spies during the Cold War since the 1980s.³ Some scholars imply that acts of treason are in fact a “moral defect.”⁴ Others are more hesitant to point the finger so easily. People are complex and multifaceted; rarely is an ethical dilemma black-and-white. It is, therefore, essential to look beyond the political and social notions of betrayal and moral defect and see where the lines of loyalty can be blurred among the myriad of personal, professional, and patriotic relationships.

Ethical Framework of Spies from a Utilitarian Perspective

During the Cold War, some of the most infamous cases of espionage that came to light found justification in the ethical framework of Utilitarianism. The theory of Utilitarianism is based on the fundamental notion that in order to determine if an action is right or wrong, the “person must weigh what would be the result of doing so.”⁵ In other words, determining what would bring happiness to the greatest amount of people is the argument that lies at the root of a Utilitarian’s actions.

During the Cold War, there were spies who defended themselves with claims that what they were doing was for the greater good. The consequences of their actions marked a critical component in understand their ethical framework as it played out in both the political and public spheres. For instance, if a spy’s actions resulted in tragedy or widespread public humiliation, they could be violently punished and made an example of. Other spies, whose crimes were not as overtly damaging, may possibly be forgiven or ignored.⁶ Ultimately, it is the consequences of the spy’s acts in the eyes of the government that will determine their fate. In other words, ethical choices come at a high cost for both the spy and the nation.⁷

From the Utilitarian perspective the backlash of treason can be a violent condemnation. Perhaps because treason results from an act of intimacy, a spy must be in a position of trust to be of any value as a source. This breaking of trust threatens to destabilize the fragile bonds that hold countries together as more than individuals, but as a community and a nation.⁸ Nevertheless, within the ideals of the Utilitarian framework, betrayal is no stretch of the imagination. Per-

sonal relationships hold little weight in this ethical framework.⁹ This creates a particular aversion to the defense of Utilitarianism—especially since acts of treason are not judged in isolation but within their wider historical narratives. Therefore, the Cold War set the stage for the most contentious public outrage against spies, the ultimate act of betrayal against a country. To consort with the USSR was to turn your back on every American ideal. To the U.S. government and the public, this was not to be tolerated—someone was going to be made an example out of.

The Rosenbergs

Two people would pay the ultimate price for their infractions against the United States. Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were American Communists who spied for Russia and were put to death in June of 1953.¹⁰ Both Julius and Ethel were supporters of the Communist Party, and they were actively involved in their youth. In the early 1940s, Julius was hired by the U.S. Army Signal Corps and was eventually promoted to engineer inspector in 1942. According to records, Julius provided his Communist caseworkers with information on the army's research and development of multiple weapons, including the atom bomb.¹¹

In 1950, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) sought out Julius and Ethel Rosenberg to confront them on their activities. David Greenglass, Ethel's brother, had implicated them. The Rosenbergs were later charged with conspiracy to commit espionage and sent to trial—told by the Soviets to plead not guilty, they did.¹² The evidence on Ethel was practically nonexistent; her brother, David, sealed her fate with his testimony by saying that she had been the one to type up reports to send to the Soviet embassy. Nonetheless, both Rosenbergs were sentenced to death by Judge Irving Kaufman, who stated that they had committed “an act worse than murder.”¹³ President Eisenhower could have granted the Rosenbergs clemency, but he chose not to. In his private writings he said that the Rosenbergs' case was one of treason, and due to the particular political environment the public was in favor of the death penalty.¹⁴

The Rosenbergs were executed in June of 1953, leaving behind two young sons. Their case has raised a lot of concern and controversy over the years, particularly since the release of the grand jury testimony, which showed that Ethel had no legitimate involvement in the conspiracy.¹⁵

Utilitarianism and the Rosenbergs

The Rosenbergs' personal letters to one another provide ample support of the Utilitarian framework. During their imprisonment in Sing Sing from 1951 to 1953, Ethel and Julius continuously wrote letters to one another and other fellow citizens whom they counted on for political support.¹⁶ It is critical to keep in mind the politics of the era—the Rosenbergs' trial took place among the backdrop of “the Cold War, the Korean War, and McCarthyism.”¹⁷ The strength of the anti-Communist sentiment in the country left the Rosenbergs all but isolated from anyone who would be willing to come to their defense. Self-preservation and disassociation marred the personal relationships that once existed among the Rosenbergs and their compatriots. Even Ethel's own brother and sister-in-law testified against her.

As previously mentioned, these activities of treason and their consequences made the Rosenbergs the poster children for anti-Communist sentiment. Even Julius was well aware of this notion, according to their defense attorney, Emmanuel Bloch. Julius said to him: “This death sentence is not surprising. It had to be. There had to be a Rosenberg Case. There had to be a Rosenberg Case because there had to be an intensification of the hysteria in America to make the Korean War acceptable to the American people. There had to be hysteria and a fear sent through America in order to get increased war budgets.”¹⁸

In their letters to one another, Ethel and Julius were careful with what they said, often mentioning that the letters were censored and that it caused delays for them reaching the other.¹⁹ Yet as their execution neared, the letters between Ethel, Julius, and Emmanuel became more frank. In one letter to Emmanuel, Ethel says, “I am not much at saying goodbyes because I believe that good accomplishments live on forever by this I can say my love of life has never been so strong because I've seen how beautiful the future can be. Since I feel that we in some small measure have contributed our share in this direction, I think my sons and millions of others will have benefited by it.”²⁰ Ethel had come to terms with her fate, disillusioned by Judge Kaufmann's decision to not reduce their sentence and President Eisenhower's refusal to grant clemency—her words suggest that she believed her and Julius's actions contributed to the greater good. In addition, Ethel's very last piece of writing was found scribbled on a piece of paper with the words “honor means you are too proud to

do wrong—but pride means: that you will not own that you have done wrong at all.”²¹

Despite Ethel Rosenberg’s much more open ethical sentiments in her letters, Julius very much maintained his innocence and criticisms of the government throughout. In one of his final letters he stated “the present administration in Washington is keenly aware of this factor is attested to by its concentration on psychological warfare and it’s strenuous efforts to control the minds of the public in a way that they accept its concocted false version of our case as the ‘truth.’”²² Historically, it is stated that the pressure of the death penalty and the harsh conditions set on Julius and his wife, Ethel, were to coerce Julius into confessing.²³ Yet this never happened. Their own words fixate Ethel and Julius into the framework of Utilitarianism—they were fighting for a cause they believed in; a war against the evils of capitalism and Washington. On the other hand, their words, along with the facts of the case, found out nearly fifty years later with the admission of Morton Sobell (discussed below), is evidence that their story goes far beyond this—their story is a complex weave of relationships among friends, family, civic duty, political beliefs, and ultimately treason.

A Spy within the Ethical Framework of Subjectivism

Developed by David Hume, ethical subjectivism is based on the idea that a person’s “moral opinions are based on feelings and nothing more.”²⁴ There is no objectivity within this framework—the whole conception is that a person bases his or her ethical choices on feelings. Therefore, a moral judgment must be supported by good reasons. The problem with subjectivism arises when attempting to navigate between moral conduct and reasoning. Feelings can tempt a person to ignore reason—which strays away from moral thinking altogether.²⁵ Therefore, the ethical framework of subjectivism raises serious concerns in application.

When a spy attaches himself or herself to the moral defense of subjectivism, an inherently difficult situation arises. How can we place one person’s feelings or motivations above another’s? Why do *their* feelings make *them* right? Why not someone else’s feelings? These questions and many more make for weak ethical motivations for spies. Yet people who have committed espionage before have expressed this sentiment, as is evidenced by the fascinating case of Morton Sobell.

Morton Sobell

Morton Sobell was convicted along with the Rosenbergs in 1951 and was sentenced to thirty years in prison. The case is still considered one of the most controversial in U.S. legal history.²⁶ The lack of evidence and the witnesses who perjured themselves were all that substantiated the case against Sobell. In 1950, according to his original accounts, Sobell and his wife were kidnapped in Mexico and brought back to the United States to stand trial.²⁷ Despite no evidence connecting him with handing over information on the atom bomb, Sobell was tried along with his friends, the Rosenbergs. Ultimately, Sobell was charged with conspiracy to commit espionage, although the evidence against him was slim at best. The only evidence the prosecutors could present against Sobell was the testimony of his good friend, who also happened to be the best man at his wedding, Max Elitcher. Elitcher, who perjured himself, testified that Sobell had given over secret documents that he had taken from his job at General Electric and handed them over to the Soviets.²⁸ Sobell did not testify at his trial; instead, he invoked his right to the Fifth Amendment. In spite of the evidence presented against him, Sobell was found guilty and sentenced to thirty years in prison. In fact, J. Edgar Hoover wrote in his conclusions on the case that both Morton Sobell and Julius Rosenberg should be sentenced to death and that Ethel Rosenberg should be sentenced to life in prison.²⁹

Throughout his eighteen years in prison, Sobell maintained his innocence. During his time in prison, Sobell penned his autobiography, *On Doing Time*, in which he describes many of the experiences he had while serving in Alcatraz. It was not until 2008, some fifty-seven years later, with the death of Ruth Greenglass (the wife of David Greenglass), that the grand jury transcripts from the Rosenberg and Sobell trial were released.³⁰

Subjectivism and Morton Sobell

The case of Morton Sobell presents quite the enigma. In his autobiography, Sobell fervently distances himself from his association with the Communist Party of the United States and his relationship with the Rosenbergs. Sobell, on his relationship with Julius and the Communist Party in 1948, stated: "I never asked Julius whether he was a member of the Communist Party, and he never asked me. I wasn't reading the *Worker* regularly nor had I given any consideration to

rejoining the Communist party since our move to New York. Perhaps it was because my energies were fully absorbed by my job and family.”³¹ While he claims to have never spoken of the Communist Party with Julius, he had known the Rosenbergs since the summer of 1940, some eight years earlier. The only apprehension that Sobell acknowledges in his autobiography concerning his affiliation with communism was his early participation in the Young Communist League meetings, since both he and his wife, Helen, had signed affidavits stating that they were not, and had never been, members of the Communist Party at their jobs.

Although Sobell downplays his engagement with the Communist Party by 1948, only a few pages before he makes the above statement he zealously describes that his initial motivations for joining the party were because he “felt it was the only organization which got down to the fundamentals and called for an overthrow of the system and the evils which were inherent in the capitalist structure.”³² In fact, when describing his interactions with co-workers at General Electric (GE), Sobell states that he refrained from completely telling them his views on the world because “I never felt entirely comfortable in the company of these men. Theirs seemed a different world. I saw the war primarily as a fight against fascism, while they saw it in terms of fight for their country. The overthrow of capitalism was a basic premise of my existence.”³³ Sobell’s entire autobiography contains many of these contradictory arguments.

The inherent contradictions in Sobell’s book evidence the inconsistency in his thinking at the time. On the one hand he wanted to defend himself and his self-proclaimed innocence. On the other hand, he wanted to do and defend what he felt was right. Sobell’s most recent interview with the *New York Times* in September of 2008 provides some much-needed perspective for his autobiography. In the interview Sobell, then ninety-one, admitted to turning over military secrets to the Soviets. When asked if he was a spy, Sobell merely brushed it off by saying, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, call it that. I never thought of it as that in those terms.”³⁴ Even though Sobell admits to turning over confidential information to the Soviets, he continues to downplay his role in supporting them, stating that the information he supplied was merely defensive—pertaining to an aircraft gun. He notes that there is a “big difference between giving that and stuff that could be used to attack our country.”³⁵ Some fifty-seven years after he was put on trial, Sobell still found the need to defend his convictions and actions against the public. It is evident through his many

writings that Sobell was a passionate supporter of the Communist Party but was torn between his political ideals, his friendships, and his loyalties. In fact, these ideals all overlapped each one, requiring different levels of ethical duty and commitment. Emotions can blur the lines that once made Sobell's affiliations so clear. Morton Sobell made the apparent choice to support his political ideals for the purposes of self-righteousness and firm beliefs; albeit against his intentions, his choices were at the expense of his friends and their lives.

The Cliché of Ethical Egoism

Ethical egoism is the ideal that a person will only pursue his or her own self-interest.³⁶ Due to movies and television, the ethical framework of egoism is most often associated with spies and espionage. The “bad guy” and the “traitor” embody the character of the spy. From a simple perspective, ethical egoism, as a theory, would seem to support these moral shortcomings, presuming that a spy would do things to intentionally harm others to his advantage. However, this fanciful notion is false. In fact, ethical egoism does not substantiate these claims of harming others. On the contrary, it encourages individuals to assist others, where the individual's needs are in common with others—and by helping them you are helping yourself. Ethical egoism is not the root of evil that it is often associated with it because it “endorses selfishness, not foolishness.”³⁷

Arguably, this ethical framework is flawed. It leaves a lot unanswered in questions of moral conflicts. As demonstrated from the two cases discussed above, ethical and moral dilemmas are rarely, if ever, black and white. Ethical egoism fails to provide an answer in the face of an ethical conflict of interest. When both are at risk, should the spy be more loyal to his country? Or should the spy be loyal to his friends? Personal gain can be attained by choosing to remain loyal to either. On the other hand, alienating either can have serious consequences.

The case of Elizabeth Bentley subscribes to ideals of ethical egoism. The story as depicted by the newspapers and media sources painted the picture of a woman who self-righteously set out to become the “Spy Queen.” Yet the writings of Elizabeth herself and her biographers show a whole other side to her. They depict a lonely woman, with a great deal of inner turmoil, who was looking for somewhere to fit in.

Elizabeth Bentley

As one of the most notable spies of the Cold War era for the Soviets, Bentley has become something of a legend.³⁸ Raised in an upper-class family, Bentley attended Vassar College and then went on to Columbia for her master's. It was during this time in her life that Bentley began to drink in excess and was viewed as a rather lonely character by those around her.³⁹ At one point Bentley attempted to commit suicide, and it was well known that for the rest of her life she suffered from depression and alcoholism.⁴⁰ Unable to find work after completing her master's degree, Bentley began attending meetings for the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA). Bentley used CPUSA as a social network, which is where she met Jacob Golos, a Soviet secret police agent. Jacob Golos was a pivotal character in Bentley's life. Golos became her lover and taught her how to be a spy, eventually using her to work for him.

By 1941, Bentley was heavily engaged in spying and collecting information against the United States. Traveling back and forth between Washington, DC, and New York, she collected information, relayed Soviet instructions, delivered Communist Party news, and collected Party dues.⁴¹ After Golos's death, Bentley was isolated from the Communist espionage community, and by 1945 she had quit her ties with the Party. Paranoid about her affiliation with the Communist Party, Bentley chose to go to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) with her information that same year. Eventually, Bentley agreed to become a double agent within the CPUSA, due possibly to the fact that she had already been under investigation by the FBI for her connections with the Party since 1941.⁴²

Her work as a double agent ended in 1946 when she testified before a grand jury for the House Un-American Activities Committee. In 1948, after converting to Catholicism, Bentley helped the U.S. government once again by naming thirty-seven individuals who worked in various government departments and who had supplied her and others with confidential military and political information.⁴³ In fact, Bentley's testimony helped convict Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and Morton Sobell, among others. In the years after her testimony, Bentley's life spiraled back and forth between alcoholism, depression, and unemployment. Elizabeth Bentley was a lonely woman looking for something or somewhere to belong—it was her choices that made her front-page news.

Elizabeth Bentley: Ethical Egotist or Misunderstood?

The draw to communism for Elizabeth Bentley was strong. For someone like her who had no work, no real family (both parents were deceased), and little connection to anything in her life, the Party filled a void. It provided emotional, psychological, and social meaning to her life unlike anything had ever been able to do before. Bentley's own writings reflect a much different picture of her espionage career. Golos was the love of Bentley's life; she followed him blindly into engaging in espionage and was proud of her successes because these made him proud.⁴⁴ His death left her entrenched in the espionage network of the Soviets without her anchor, but she had nothing else. Without the Communist Party she had no income, and most of all she had no purpose.

After a few years she became disillusioned with the Party and decided to sever her ties with them. This was a tough decision, and she couldn't just walk away—things didn't work like that. So she chose to play her cards and turn to the FBI. Bentley stated that her reason for dissociation was because she had become disillusioned with the Soviet's exploitation of the United States.⁴⁵ In reality, Elizabeth realized could no longer trust the Soviets to protect and support her, so she chose to become a double agent within the CPUSA for the FBI. After one year she ended her career as a double agent. It is said that she later became a lecturer and consultant on communism for the FBI.

Yes, Elizabeth did make many of her ethical decisions based on what was in her self-interest. However, Elizabeth Bentley was also a victim of circumstance. Her loyalties to Golos were buried when he died, and so was her passion for the Communist Party—where it once filled a void it was now nothing but a bittersweet memory for her. Bentley is not unlike the Rosenbergs or Sobell; she, too, was confronted with an ethical dilemma that forced her to choose a side. She chose to protect herself before any significant harm could be done to her. Both the Rosenbergs and Sobell attempted to do the same. The Rosenbergs steadfastly proclaimed their innocence and appealed their conviction; Sobell also proclaimed his innocence, only to confess fifty-seven years later.

Conclusion

Each of these cases present different ethical dilemmas. No spy is quite like the other; they each had their own combination of politi-

cal, familial, social, and ideological motivations for committing the acts that they did. Their motives as told by the courts and the public differ substantially from their own words. The public marred the Rosenbergs as a traitorous American couple who handed over precious documents to the Soviets. On the other hand, the Rosenbergs felt that they were doing what was right. According to Ethel, Julius and she had left their mark on the world.⁴⁶ In the case of Morton Sobell, he was defended by many public figures and had proclaimed his own innocence for over fifty years. Nonetheless, in 2008 Sobell confessed his part in providing secret materials to the Soviets and defended his actions by stating that he had not given over information on anything that could have been used to attack the United States. Why he felt the need to justify his actions fifty-seven years later is unknown. Finally, Elizabeth Bentley, probably the most intriguing character of the Cold War spy ring, led a tragically sad and lonely life. Elizabeth found comfort in the Communist Party, and when it came time to choose between a life as a spy or a life as a normal citizen, she chose to leave the espionage lifestyle behind.

The key element in this discussion of the ethics of a Cold War spy is that of personal history. Each of these cases presents four very different characters whose circumstances ultimately placed them in precarious situations. Not one can be placed into just one particular ethical framework. The ethics of spying are not straightforward; there are many different levels of association and loyalty that overlap. This is critical to understanding the complexity of the human being and the study of ethics. Traditionally, social analysis has failed to take into account the impact of the individual's personal history into the discussion of ethics, yet it is a critical component of understanding a person's identity and therefore his or her choices. The ethics of espionage and spying during the Cold War may not be black and white—but they are a good starting point for beginning to understand the complexity surrounding human nature, choice, and ethics.

Notes

1. Richard C. S. Trahair and Robert L. Miller, *Encyclopedia of Cold War Espionage, Spies, and Secret Operations* (New York: Enigma Books, 2009), xi–xii.

2. *Ibid.*, xv.

3. *Ibid.*, xxi–xxiii.

4. Sharika Thiranagama and Tobias Kelly, ed., *Traitors: Suspicion, Intimacy, and the Ethics of State-Building* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 17.

5. James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2003), 105.

6. Thiranagama and Kelly, *Traitors*, 21.

7. *Ibid.*, 22.

8. *Ibid.*, 2.

9. Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 110.

10. Trahair and Miller, *Encyclopedia of Cold War Espionage*, 359.

11. *Ibid.*, 360.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 361.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 362.

16. Michael Meeropol, ed., *The Rosenberg Letters: A Complete Edition of the Prison Correspondence of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), ix.

17. *Ibid.*, xvii.

18. *Ibid.*, xxxi.

19. *Ibid.*, "Julius to Ethel—July 28, 1950," 10–11.

20. *Ibid.*, "Ethel to Manny—June 18, 1953," 701.

21. *Ibid.*, "Ethel," 704.

22. *Ibid.*, "Julius to Manny—June 10, 1953," 694.

23. *Ibid.*, xxxi.

24. Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 33.

25. *Ibid.*, 47.

26. Trahair and Miller, *Encyclopedia of Cold War Espionage*, 382.

27. Martin Sobel, *On Doing Time* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 6–21.

28. Trahair and Miller, *Encyclopedia of Cold War Espionage*, 382.

29. *Ibid.*, 383.

30. *Ibid.*, 384.

31. *The Worker* was a newspaper published by the Communist Party in the United States. Sobel, *On Doing Time*, 53.

32. *Ibid.*, 37–38.

33. *Ibid.*, 44.

34. Sam Roberts, "Figure in Rosenberg Case Admits to Soviet Spying," *New York Times*, September 11, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/12/nyregion/12spy.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed November 20, 2011).

35. *Ibid.*

36. Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 77.

37. *Ibid.*, 78.

38. Trahair and Miller, *Encyclopedia of Cold War Espionage*, 22.

39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 23.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Lauren Kessler, *Clever Girl: Elizabeth Bentley, The Spy Who Ushered in the McCarthy Era* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 68.
45. Trahair and Miller, *Encyclopedia of Cold War Espionage*, 23.
46. Meeropol, *The Rosenberg Letters*, "Ethel to Manny—June 18, 1953," 701.

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