

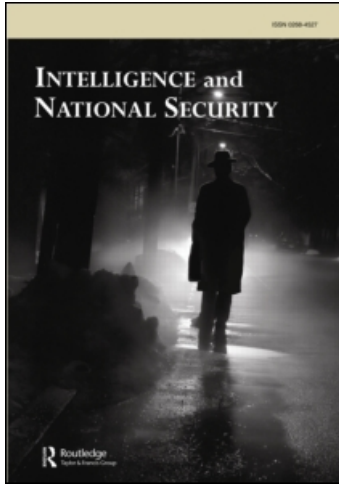
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Blond Queens, Red Spiders, and Neurotic Old Maids: Gender and Espionage in the Early Cold War

KATHRYN S. OLMSTED

Many books have been written about the male spies of the early Cold War, but the women have not received nearly as much attention. In part, this is because journalists at the time reduced these women to gender stereotypes and portrayed them as neurotic old maids or svelte young seductresses. This article examines the cases of Elizabeth Bentley, Priscilla Hiss, Ethel Rosenberg, and Judith Coplon. It analyzes the gender constructions used in the media coverage of these women, and argues that exploring these constructions is crucial to understanding the significance of these cases.

The American public first learned of extensive Soviet espionage in the United States in 1948 when a 'red spy queen' came in from the cold and told her story to the New York *World Telegram*. The anonymous 'svelte and striking blonde' had managed two large spy rings in New York and Washington, she confessed. But then the young, glamorous Vassar graduate had suffered from 'gnawing pangs of conscience' and defected to the FBI.¹

The *World-Telegram* did not run a photograph with its exclusive stories on Elizabeth Bentley. But when the spy queen did decide to drop her mask, as her newspaper sponsors put it, the result was rather anticlimactic. Even the most flattering lighting and focus supplied by the *World-Telegram* photographers could not hide the fact that the 'young blonde' had short brown hair, wore glasses, and looked much older than her alleged 36 years.² Some of the reporters covering the story were disillusioned. 'She was plump and had a sharp nose and a receding chin', *Time* magazine reported with disappointment. 'She was not blonde; her hair was dark brown'.³

In fact, Bentley had been one of the most significant Soviet case officers in America, and her defection had helped to start the post-World War II Red Scare. But her public image never recovered from the implication that she

was a lying, 'neurotic spinster' – a plain-faced, middle-aged woman living a pathetic fantasy life.⁴

Bentley did not seem credible in part because she did not meet the media's expectations of a female secret agent. Reporters focused on her looks and her sexuality, and failed to grasp her true importance as a spy and as a defector. Moreover, her case was not isolated. Soon after Bentley went public with her story, Priscilla Hiss, Judith Coplon, and Ethel Rosenberg all faced public examinations of their possible complicity in espionage – and of their appearance, their sexuality, and their relationships with men.

This article examines the stereotypes of female spies, femme fatales, and female Communists, and demonstrates how these stereotypes were imposed on the accused female spies of the early Cold War. Bentley, Coplon, Hiss, and Rosenberg received the most media coverage of any female Communist spies, and their cases best illustrate the gender constructions used to interpret them. The media coverage of these shrewish wives, neurotic old maids, and voluptuous young vixens told readers little about the actual damage done by these accused spies. The coverage did, however, reveal a great deal about changing gender relations in the Cold War era.

When the *World-Telegram* started its series of articles on the anonymous 'spy queen', its readers knew just how she would look and act. They had learned this from spy novels, pulp magazine, and movies that had established the stereotype of female spies. The reporters who covered the accused female Communist spies in the early Cold War drew upon this stereotype, as well as those of femme fatales and Communist women, to explain these women spies to their readers.

Since their invention in the nineteenth century, spy novels had featured male heroes aiming to save civilization. These action-heroes were smart, tough, and strong. For example, Operator 5, a pulp magazine hero in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, was 'endowed with a quickness of comprehension, power of intellect, and physical competency, which enabled him to master a variety of different arts', according to Pulp Classics.⁵ Most female spies, however, played auxiliary roles in magazines, novels, and movies. In the Operator 5 series, for example, the superspy's main female sidekick, his twin sister, Nan, was relegated to the role of the 'skirt': the villain kidnapped her, she screamed, and Operator 5 rescued her.⁶

In a few isolated cases, female fictional spies did exhibit some power and agency. Ming Dwan, otherwise known as Myra Reldon, proved to The Shadow, the spy hero of 1930s pulps, that she was 'more capable than an entire horde of battling Chinese' when she captured him.⁷ Similarly, in the 1931 movie *Dishonored*, Marlene Dietrich played a cool and competent Agent X-27 of the Austrian Secret Police, capable of seducing an enemy and then spiking his drink with the strychnine concealed in her pendant necklace.

However, the few operational female spies in novels, pulps, and movies always shared one characteristic: they used their bodies to seduce men into giving up secrets.⁸ The best example of the spy-as-seductress was Mata Hari, whose World War I career was dramatized in numerous books and a 1932 film starring Greta Garbo. As the most famous female spy in history, Mata Hari helped establish the stereotype: the beautiful, doomed exotic dancer, who had been manipulated by a powerful man into sleeping with other men to get their secret documents. In short, there was no fictional precedent for a female case officer – a woman who managed and supervised other agents, but did not try to infiltrate government offices herself.

There was, however, abundant fictional precedent for women who transgressed traditional boundaries and betrayed men. The femme fatale image was especially prevalent in the United States after World War II. Scholars have noted that artistic representations of the femme fatale are most common – and frantic – at times when a society is experiencing changes in the balance of power between men and women.⁹ And in America during and after World War II, gender roles were changing rapidly. As Elaine Tyler May has written, six million women had demonstrated during the war that ‘women could do “men’s work” and survive without men’.¹⁰ May suggests that women’s increasing independence made men more fearful of women who challenged their economic and cultural power.¹¹

Popular culture reflected this fear of strong women. Increasingly in the 1940s, the media portrayed assertive women as scary and unnatural. As Susan Hartmann notes, in contrast to the competent, decisive career women of the late 1930s and early 1940s, women characters in mid-1940s movies increasingly tended to be treacherous or helpless.¹² The archetype of the treacherous woman was the film noir villainess.¹³ By 1948, the ‘Bad Blonde’, in Nora Sayre’s phrase, was a stock character in film noir, detective fiction and the early anti-Communist films.¹⁴ The reporters covering Bentley would effectively dye her hair in their stories to fit the stereotype.

Finally, stereotypes of female Communists also informed the media coverage of Bentley and other women spies. The Communist woman, according to American movies and fiction, was cold, ruthless, and, above all, humorless. At the time that Bentley went public with her story, the primary examples in films were Garbo as the unpleasant *Ninotchka* and Hedy Lamarr as a Stalinist streetcar conductor in *Comrade X*. By the 1950s and 1960s, this stereotype would be well established, with Angela Lansbury portraying the prototypical evil Communist Woman in *The Manchurian Candidate*.

Communist women were not only humorless, but also they were extremely hostile. Political Scientist Herbert Krugman, for example, determined that ‘four out of five male Communists were described by their analysts as persons of real talent, while only two of five women subjects could be said to

possess any talent at all'. The female Communists, Krugman said, were angry, defiant women who were better 'haters' than men.¹⁵ In short, assertive women were doubly threatening in the early years of the Cold War because female assertiveness was seen as a Communist characteristic.

If all Communist women were dangerous, Communist wives were especially threatening. The domineering Communist wife became a staple of anti-Communist propaganda. For example, in the 1962 Defense Department short *Red Nightmare*, the flirtatious, deferential wife is transformed into a robotic shrew by the influence of Communist doctrine. Many Americans agreed with Morris Ernst, the intensely anti-Communist co-counsel of the American Civil Liberties Union, that 'in Communist marriages the wife is the more dominant partner'.¹⁶ In fact, a home with a strong wife and a henpecked husband seemed to be a sure recipe for raising Communist children. Krugman found that a huge majority of American Communists came from 'mother-dominated families'.¹⁷ This was also the view of Philip Wylie, who in 1942 coined the term 'momism' to explain the many dangerous effects of excessive maternal attention.¹⁸

This association of communism with domineering women stemmed from an oversimplified view of the Communist Party's theories on gender equality. Theoretically, the Party advocated the end of discrimination against women in the marketplace and in the bedroom. Leaders condemned unequal pay along with the sexual double standard. Especially in their early years, Communists were known for their bohemian attitudes towards sex, and Party leaders had numerous affairs.¹⁹

Of course, the Party did not always deliver on its rhetorical commitments to gender equality. In general, American Communists in this era believed that male chauvinism was a 'bourgeois concern', not nearly as important as racism or poverty. By the mid-1930s, Party leaders also toned down their rhetoric about sexual experimentation, hoping to broaden their appeal to culturally conservative American workers. Nevertheless, despite its limits, the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) still advanced a more progressive and broad-minded view of women and of sex than other political parties in the United States.

In short, when Elizabeth Bentley went public with her story in 1948, many reporters and government officials were worried about the changing relations between men and women, and especially fearful of the potentially deleterious effect of Communist ideology on the female sex. These cultural assumptions about strong women, deviant women, and Communist women would provide the backdrop for the construction of the female Communist spies' images.

When reporters looked at single women accused of Soviet espionage, they expected to find Communist Mata Haris. Such women, of course, would be femme fatales with little sense of humor and even less sense of sexual

restraint. The news stories on the single 'girl spies' for Moscow, Judith Coplon and Elizabeth Bentley, reflected these assumptions.

Bentley was the first 'red spy queen', the most important female spy in US history, and, in many ways, a catalyst for the redhunting frenzy that was to follow. A highly intelligent but emotionally troubled woman, she had flirted with socialism and fascism before joining the CPUSA in 1935. In the Party, she met and fell in love with one of the most powerful Soviet spies in the United States, Jacob Golos. Golos trained her to be his courier and his assistant in espionage. After his death, she became a major spy in her own right, controlling and debriefing about 30 Americans who passed her documents and information. She heartily disliked the Soviets who supervised her, however, and grew increasingly obstreperous and difficult for them to control. Documents from the former Soviet Union show that her supervisor recommended her assassination. Bentley did not know this at the time, but she did suspect that her life was in danger. In 1945, to avoid death at the hands of the NKVD and what she feared might be imminent arrest by the US government, she went to the FBI and confessed all. Three years later, she took her story to the *World-Telegram*, apparently in hopes of finding a new career and a source of income as an ex-Communist writer and lecturer.²⁰

For years, scholars did not know whether Bentley was telling the truth. But in recent years, the declassification of Soviet and American documents has demonstrated that most of what she told the FBI in 1945 was correct. Furthermore, these documents have also shown that she was far more significant than most scholars had appreciated. By naming more than 80 people in the United States who had helped her to spy, she effectively shut down Soviet espionage in North America for several years.²¹

The press coverage of Bentley set the paradigm for the female spies to follow. Lacking access to secret documents, the reporters could not assess whether she was lying or the relative importance of the material she stole. Instead, they grew obsessed with questions about her gender and sexuality. How could a woman do something like this? Was it connected to sex? If so, was she deviant because she had too much sex, or too little? The reporters could not agree on the answers to these questions. Depending on which newspaper they read, Americans learned that Bentley was either (a) a sex-starved, man-eating temptress; or (b) a sexually repressed, man-hating spinster.

Bentley's supporters made her out to be a Mata Hari. The Vassar graduate had very little in common with the Dutch erotic dancer who had been executed by the French for allegedly passing state secrets to the Germans during World War I. After all, Bentley never had slept with any of her sources. She did not entice her government contacts to give her documents.

Moreover, as her critics noted, she did not look like a promising candidate for that role.

But right-wing newspapers seemed determined to make her play that part. For one thing, the Mata Hari image sold newspapers. But more important, Bentley as femme fatale seemed to fit into the world-view of anticommunists. The Communist woman was unnatural and dangerous, they believed – a black widow, whose extremist politics had caused her to lose her morals and seek to destroy men.

The *World-Telegram*, with exclusive access to Bentley for several days, led the pack in describing her as a sexually alluring, beautiful young blonde who had charmed government officials into revealing their secrets. Other conservative papers quickly followed the *World-Telegram's* lead. At the beginning of the Bentley story, no one in the media outside of the *World-Telegram* knew what she looked like. But the reporters on the *New York Journal-American*, a Hearst paper that specialized in exposing the 'Red menace', could guess. The Communists routinely used 'attractive women' as 'recruiting agents', the paper noted in its first story on the 'mystery blonde' who had chosen to expose her 'Communist masters'.²² Because the paper had a certain idea of what Bentley *should* look like, it was determined to maintain that image, no matter what. Thus when the 'mystery blonde' finally revealed herself, the *Journal-American* described her variously as a 'shapely blonde' and a 'blonde and blue-eyed New Yorker' in a 'form-fitting black dress' who had 'lured' secrets out of weak New Dealers.²³

Liberals looked at the same woman at the witness table in the congressional hearing room and saw an altogether different person. In general, liberals painted Bentley's charges, as Earl Latham has said, as the 'imaginings of a neurotic spinster'.²⁴ They used her appearance as a tool to discredit her. If she had lied about being a 'svelte young blonde', they argued, perhaps she had imagined her life as a spy as well. Murray Kempton, for example, later dedicated several pages in his book on 1930s radicals to wondering why desperate 'old maids' like Bentley were so likely to join the Communist Party. Bentley, a silly woman who listened at keyholes like an 'old biddy' and slapped police thugs with her pocketbook, according to Kempton, was a prime example of 'a rather definite pattern' followed by 'Comrade Woman'.²⁵

Even in death, Bentley could not escape the contradictory implications of sexual license and sexual repression. Her obituaries identified her as an 'overwrought neurotic' spinster and as the 'mistress' of a master spy rather than a major agent in her own right. Most of the newspapers continued to poke fun at her appearance. To the end, she was regarded as some kind of freak: a 'dowdy' woman in a profession supposedly limited to men and the beautiful women who could seduce them.

Judith Coplon was another single woman who defied espionage stereotypes. In March 1949, the FBI arrested Coplon, a 27-year-old Justice Department employee, on charges of spying for the Soviet Union. Agents stopped her as she attempted to meet with Valentin Gubitchev, a Russian engineer attached to the United Nations. Her purse was stuffed with top-secret documents.²⁶

The FBI, in other words, appeared to have caught her red-handed. But Coplon offered a convoluted explanation. She had the documents, she said, because she was studying for the civil service examination and writing a novel. She had met the Russian because she was in love with him. ‘When you are in love with a person you don’t care whether they are red or green’, her lawyer told the jury.²⁷

This explanation fell apart when the prosecutor confronted Coplon on the stand with shocking new evidence: while she had supposedly been madly in love with Gubitchev, she had spent the night with Harold Shapiro, a colleague in the Justice Department. To the tabloids’ delight, Coplon and her attorney began shouting at the prosecutor, while Coplon’s mother wailed and screamed. Coplon protested that Shapiro and others had set her up, and anyway she had never had sex with him. ‘You have branded me as a spy. Now you are trying to brand me as a harlot!’ she cried.²⁸ Certainly, the prosecutors could not have hoped for a better stroke of luck: the incident seemed to prove that she was both lying and unchaste. She was convicted both in this trial and a later one, but eventually her convictions were overturned, in part because the FBI had bugged her conversations with her lawyer and searched her purse illegally.

As with Bentley, journalists had difficulty deciding how to portray Coplon. She was charged with stealing government documents, not with seducing government officials. Her looks were immaterial to the case. Yet she herself had introduced romance into the case with her alibi – and she happened to be young and attractive. Most reporters could not resist framing her as another Mata Hari.

The *World-Telegram* reporters – the same ones who had discovered and labeled Elizabeth Bentley – slavered over her appearance, describing Coplon in their first story on the case as ‘an attractive dark-haired girl with full lips and a shapely figure’ encased in a ‘black form-fitting sweater’. The *World-Telegram* continued to describe her as an ‘attractive’, ‘pretty’, and ‘slim’ defendant, who whispered her not guilty plea ‘though lips brilliantly marked with lipstick’. Her meetings with Gubitchev were ‘rendezvous’ and ‘trysts’.²⁹ The *New York Journal-American* also repeatedly described her as an ‘attractive’ and ‘trim’ brunette.³⁰

But she was a Communist Mata Hari, which meant that she was more than just sexy; she was also filled with hatred. The *Washington Post* went through

the thesaurus finding words to describe the defendant's depth of hatred and contempt for the trial and the US government: she was 'coldly furious', 'a figure of fury and flame', her face contorted in 'grimace of hate'.³¹ In the view of the *Post* reporter, Communist hatred was a mutable phenomenon: at times Coplon's 'stared hotly' and 'burned', while at others they spouted 'cool hate' that 'flowed out, like a black river jetting into the eyes of the prosecutors'.³² To further confuse the picture, he also reported that her eyes were 'masked' and showed no emotion.³³ For all his hyperbole about her eyes, though, they did not fascinate the reporter as much as her 'bosom', which 'heaved', 'quivered', and, best of all, was inadequately 'obscured' by her thin blouse.³⁴

Even the staid *New York Times*, by far the most restrained of all the media outlets covering the trial, described Coplon as 'unflinching' and emotionless in almost the same breath as it proclaimed her 'nervous', 'hysterical', 'bitter' and 'raging'.³⁵ All the common stereotypes about female Communists and female spies were thrown together in the Coplon trial coverage, without regard to internal consistency. She was cold, ruthless, passionless; she was hot, sexy, raging, passionate. Above all, she was an uncontrolled and uncontrollable 'mystery woman', and therefore deceptive and dangerous.

Coplon and Bentley were subjected to minute examinations of their sex lives, but at least as single women they escaped the charge of abusing or cuckolding male partners. Married women confronted a different set of cultural expectations and stereotypes. The cases of Priscilla Hiss and Ethel Rosenberg illustrate how cultural constructions of Communist wives warped the perceptions of male reporters and investigators. Just as many investigators and journalists assumed that the Bentley and Coplon cases were about sex, so they assumed that the Hiss and Rosenberg cases were about domination. While single Communist females were frightening because of their uncontrolled sexuality, the domineering, manipulative Communist wife represented another cautionary image of powerful women out of male control.

After State Department official Alger Hiss was accused of espionage, his wife, Priscilla, was vilified by reporters, prosecutors, investigators, and even alleged friends as the siren who had led her husband astray. Like the women in film noir, like some conservatives' fevered notions of Elizabeth, she was portrayed as the evil temptress who had led her husband down the road to treason and betrayal – or possibly even framed him to make it look like he had gone down that road.

Priscilla was certainly the intellectual equal of her husband. Like him, she had gone to a prestigious college (in her case, Bryn Mawr; in his, Johns Hopkins). She had done graduate work in English at Columbia and Yale, and written an exhaustively researched account of the graduate programs in the

fine arts throughout the United States.³⁶ She was also active for a short time in the New York Socialist party. Once Alger took a job with the Roosevelt administration, however, Priscilla became a full-time wife and mother.

Alger's friends believed that she was unhappy and frustrated in that role, and that she took her frustration out on her husband. In their view, she was 'domineering', 'hard', and 'a femme fatale'.³⁷ From the time the case broke open in 1948, these friends of Alger whispered their suspicions about his 'markedly left wing' wife who 'exercised an extremely strong influence over him'.³⁸ Thus when their friend stood accused of betraying his country, they had to believe it was her fault. The list of Alger's defenders who whispered that his wife had either seduced him into spying or framed him was impressive in its length and variety. Eleanor Roosevelt, several of Alger Hiss's defense attorneys, and the judge in Hiss's first trial (who was quite sympathetic to Hiss) all believed what one reporter called the 'common gossip' that Alger was covering up for Priscilla.³⁹

This explanation was convenient, because it helped account for the damning documentary evidence while providing even more proof of Alger's self-sacrificing nobility. It did, however, take a leap of logic to believe that Priscilla slipped into Alger's office when he was not looking to steal documents (or convinced some other poor soul to do so). Some muttered that she had been having an affair with Alger's accuser, Whittaker Chambers; others suggested she was sleeping with – and stealing documents for – Henry Collins, another State Department employee and accused spy. There is no evidence for either rumor, and Alger and Priscilla angrily denied them.⁴⁰

It is easy to understand why Alger's friends would blame Priscilla: they could not, would not, believe that their trusted ally would deceive them so completely without even a trace of anxiety or remorse. And they had never liked his nervous, brainy wife anyway.

However, Alger's opponents also saw Priscilla as the source of his problems. One FBI agent on the case, described Priscilla as 'the bitch of the case' who had lured Alger into the Communist Party, then volunteered to type the documents.⁴¹ For his part, Chambers had counted himself among Alger's many acquaintances who found Priscilla 'brittle and tense' and dissatisfied with her life as a housewife. He claimed that she had wanted to type the documents to satisfy her need for political activity.⁴² Two of Chambers's sponsors, Richard Nixon and journalist Ralph de Toledano, took the confessed spy's negative descriptions of Priscilla and substantially amplified them in their own books. Nixon, whose disgust for Priscilla seemed to grow over time, expressed anger in his own account of the Hiss-Chambers affair that he had not questioned Priscilla more intensely because she was 'if anything, a more fanatical Communist than Hiss'.⁴³ In 1986, Nixon wrote in

the *New York Times* that this was a common pattern for Communist couples: 'the wife is often more extremist than the husband'.⁴⁴

De Toledano examined Hiss's life to find the 'seeds of treason' in his 1950 book of that title.⁴⁵ One of the seeds of that deadly plant, he discovered, was the fatal woman Alger had married. De Toledano implied that Alger would have remained a comfortable, bourgeois, liberal Democrat had not this 'primly attractive, headstrong girl' enticed him to Communism. Priscilla, he said, was 'full of aggressions, snobbish ambitions, unformulated desires, and an acidulous wit'.⁴⁶ The writer made much of the fact that Priscilla was older than Alger (by 13 months), and thus allegedly patronized and manipulated him. To illustrate the extent of both Priscilla's unpleasantness and her Bolshevism, De Toledano claimed that a guest to one of her parties had once greeted her with 'It's a nice day, isn't it?' only to have her answer 'What's nice about it for the poor, exploited sharecropper?'⁴⁷

Murray Kempton, who also believed that Hiss was guilty, repeated this story in his 1955 book, only this time it was the Okies who were exploited, and the anonymous source had been invited up for a drink, not a party.⁴⁸ The lack of a citation for this story makes it impossible to verify, but whether it actually happened did not seem important to those who wanted to use it to bolster their portrait of the unsmiling, domineering 'Comrade Woman'.

Ironically, a novel published in 1947, the year before Bentley and Chambers went public with their allegations, reinforced the view of both Alger's critics and defenders that Priscilla was the 'more fanatical' Communist. Lionel Trilling's *Middle of the Journey* was a fictionalized account of a disillusioned ex-Communist – a character based on his former friend from Columbia, Whittaker Chambers – and his relationship with two well-educated Vermont fellow-travelers. Trilling portrayed the woman, Nancy Croom, as a stubborn, insensitive, dogmatic defender of totalitarian rule.⁴⁹

By 1948, informed readers assumed that the couple in the book represented the Hisses. But Lionel Trilling never met Priscilla Hiss – or Alger either, for that matter. In creating the character of Nancy Croom, he merely drew upon the same cultural assumptions about Communist women that made investigators and defenders alike see Priscilla as 'the bitch in the case'.

Ethel Rosenberg was also blamed for her husband's alleged transgressions. She and her husband, Julius, were arrested in the summer of 1950 for conspiring to steal intelligence about the atomic bomb and pass it to the Soviet Union. The Rosenbergs faced much graver charges than the Hisses. Chambers had claimed that Alger and Priscilla helped him to spy more than ten years earlier, during a time of peace for the United States. Since the statute of limitations on peacetime espionage had expired, Alger was indicted solely for perjury, and the Justice Department decided that it did not have a

solid case against Priscilla. The Rosenbergs, by contrast, were charged with wartime espionage, a capital offense with no statute of limitations. Moreover, their arrests came after the United States had entered a shooting war against Communists in Korea. In this tense atmosphere, many Americans accepted FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover's assertion that the Rosenbergs had committed the 'crime of the century'.

The press, of course, did not treat either Rosenberg kindly. In general, reporters painted them as Communist robots. According to the *World-Telegram*, Julius and Ethel took the news of their conviction for atomic espionage with 'almost brazen calmness'.⁵⁰ The *Journal-American* reported that court officials agreed they were the 'coldest fish' they had ever seen.⁵¹ A common accusation was, as Judge Irving Kaufman explained when he sentenced them to die, 'their love for their cause' was greater than their love for their family, even their own children.⁵²

But Ethel was singled out for special treatment by the media and government officials. As a woman, she was supposed to be more emotional, more committed to her family and children, less interested in politics. Indeed, in private, Ethel was a deeply sensitive person, suffering from black periods of depression, crying herself to sleep at night, aching with loneliness for her husband, worrying about her children's future.⁵³ She had been an attentive – her acquaintances said almost obsessively attentive – mother to her two young sons, and she was horrified at the trauma they were experiencing. But in public, she refused to give her enemies the satisfaction of seeing her cry.⁵⁴

Her emotionless mask in public made her seem more unnatural, more evil even than Julius. 'There is a saying that in the animal kingdom, the female is the deadlier of the species. It could be applied to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg', intoned the *World-Telegram and Sun*.⁵⁵ The *Journal-American* told its readers that Julius's 'deceptively lumpish' wife had been 'even more immersed in communism and its requirements for regimentation' than her husband.⁵⁶ In short, instead of a quiet and knowing partner in Julius's crime, Ethel was portrayed as the motive force behind the conspiracy – the femme fatale who had inspired and directed the treachery of her 'mousy' husband.⁵⁷

There were certain recurring themes in this negative press coverage of Ethel. She was three years older than Julius, which was portrayed as both unnatural and as proof that she dominated her husband. As Judge Kaufman said when he sentenced her to death, 'She is a mature woman, three years older than her husband. She was a full-fledged partner in this crime'.⁵⁸ Writers also liked to emphasize the extra jolts of electricity required to kill her. Julius had been killed on the first try. Bob Considine, a Hearst reporter allowed to witness the execution, proclaimed: 'As in life, Ethel was stronger than Julius when death came toward them'.⁵⁹

Reporters covering the case were disappointed with Ethel's looks: of all the 'red spy queens' of the 1940s and 1950s, she seemed the least likely to be a Mata Hari. As the *Journal-American* reported with regret, 'Beside the voluptuous shake artist of World War I Ethel Rosenberg presents a drab picture'. She was short, a little overweight, and favored hats 'vintage 1917'.⁶⁰ Considine of the Hearst press learned to reconcile Ethel's appearance with his preconceptions of female spies: her average looks, he concluded, were part of her disguise. He liked to use the adverb 'deceptively' when describing Ethel, as in the 'deceptively soft-looking, dumpy little woman'.⁶¹

The *World-Telegram's* reporter, however, had a different analysis: Ethel's unassuming appearance explained her motivation. In an article headlined 'Mrs. Rosenberg Was Like a Red Spider', he explained that Ethel, a 'homely girl', had early on 'felt a need to dominate a man'.⁶²

Later writers and artists would continue this theme of the domineering woman who was the master of her weak husband. Trial lawyer Louis Nizer, who believed the convictions were justified, put great emphasis on Ethel's determination. 'Her life and death confirmed an extraordinary will – a will to rise above her environment, a will to become an artist, a will to be a revolutionist and a superhuman will to live against a death current powerful enough to have destroyed two other lives'.⁶³

A largely sympathetic writer, E.L. Doctorow, painted a similar portrait of Ethel. His fictionalized account of the Rosenbergs, *The Book of Daniel*, described a household run by an icy, controlling wife and mother – a woman the government knew was stronger than her husband.⁶⁴ In paintings and dramatizations of the case, Ethel is sometimes portrayed as being as tall or even taller than Julius, Robert Meeropol, the Rosenbergs' younger son, has noted. Ethel was barely five feet tall, while Julius was five-foot-nine.⁶⁵

However, while reporters and artists widely believed that Ethel dominated Julius, the men with access to all the evidence in the case initially did not share that view. At first, the FBI and the federal prosecutors regarded Ethel simply as a pawn in their game to break Julius. Days before Ethel and Julius were sentenced to death for conspiracy to commit espionage, FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover stated that Ethel was only an accomplice 'presumed to be acting under the influence of her husband'.⁶⁶ No one at the FBI appears to have wanted the death penalty for Ethel. However, the prosecutors and the judge thought the threat of death would motivate Julius and Ethel to start talking.⁶⁷

When Ethel joined her husband in his refusal to cooperate, however, the government's image of her began to shift. The men with the most power over her life and death, Hoover and President Eisenhower, came to see her as the key to the conspiracy. Hoover was particularly influenced by a report written by Morris Ernst, the ACLU's leading 'expert' on Communism and its

dangers. Ernst psychoanalyzed the Rosenbergs, whom he had never met, and concluded 'Julius is the slave and his wife, Ethel, the master'.⁶⁸ Hoover accepted this conclusion, and withdrew his objections to Ethel's execution when he heard reports that Ethel was a bad daughter and mother.⁶⁹ Sheila Brennan even argues that Ethel received a 'disproportionate punishment' because she had overstepped 'traditional female boundaries'.⁷⁰

Eisenhower would not consider clemency for Julius or Ethel, explaining in a letter to a friend that Ethel was 'the more strong-minded and the apparent leader of the two'.⁷¹ He returned to this theme in a private letter to his son. '[I]n this instance it is the woman who is the strong and recalcitrant character, the man is the weak one. She has obviously been the leader in everything they did in the spy ring', he wrote.⁷²

Recently, Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev, granted limited access to the KGB files, looked for documents on the Rosenbergs' guilt. They found no evidence that Ethel was a full-fledged agent. Instead, she was simply an accessory to her husband.⁷³

Ethel Rosenberg was a deadly 'red spider' who deserved to die, the newspapers concluded, yet she was a disappointingly 'drab' Mata Hari. In fact, in rare moments of candor, some of the reporters covering these accused female Communist spies had to admit that they did not fit the stereotype of glamorous, smoldering blondes in evening gowns. When Judith Coplon was arrested, columnist Robert C. Ruark for the New York *World Telegram* expressed disappointment about her looks. While she was much prettier than Elizabeth Bentley, he conceded, Coplon still fell 'way short of the spy ideal'. She was too short, too athletic, too young, and too middle-class to be a real spy, he wrote. 'As everyone knows, lady spies are supposed to be named things like Sonja and Tamara and Yvonne and Magda and Elissa. They are supposed to have murky backgrounds, many men in their lives, and a look of brooding tragedy in their eyes. These eyes should always be slightly a-slant, so that the reporters may use the word "exotic" when referring to their faces'.⁷⁴

But not everyone let the truth get in the way of a good story. Reporters, investigators, and prosecutors imposed stereotypes about female spies and Communists upon these accused women spies, and these stereotypes warped the media coverage and even the judicial prosecutions of these cases. Because of widely shared views about Communist wives, the journalists and investigators believed that Ethel Rosenberg and Priscilla Hiss must be domineering shrews who had directed their husbands' espionage. At the same time, Judith Coplon must be an oversexed Stalinist betraying her country's laws and its morals. By contrast, Elizabeth Bentley, who controlled dozens of highly placed agents, was derided in the press as a 'frumpy New Englander' who could not possibly have worked as a major spy.

Indeed, the consequences of this stereotyping were most severe in the Bentley and Rosenberg cases. Bentley caused many of her credibility problems herself, of course, with her erratic behavior and her lack of documentary evidence. But certainly part of the reason that she was not taken seriously as a spy was her failure to match the Mata Hari stereotype. Similarly, there were many reasons for Ethel Rosenberg's death sentence, including her own refusal to talk with the prosecutors. But the government officials' view of her as a domineering witch certainly contributed to their decision to execute her.

When the men investigating and reporting on these cases looked at these accused female spies, their vision was distorted. Instead of real, flesh-and-blood women who helped their husbands or filched documents or managed spies, they saw deadly spiders, neurotic old maids and hysterical Stalinists. They saw, in short, frightening symbols of their own fears about changing gender relations in the early Cold War.

NOTES

1. Nelson Frank and Norton Mockridge, 'Red Ring Bared by Blond Queen', *New York World-Telegram*, 21 July 1948.
2. See the photo in the *World-Telegram* on 28 July 1948. Bentley had lied about her age; she was actually 40.
3. 'Investigations: The Network', *Time*, 9 Aug. 1948, p.14.
4. Earl Latham, *The Communist Controversy in Washington: From the New Deal to McCarthy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1966), p.160.
5. Nick Carr, *America's Secret Service Ace* (Oak Lawn, IL: Robert Weinberg 1974), p.11.
6. *Ibid.*, p.20. For a discussion of women's marginal roles in espionage fiction, see Christine Bold, 'Secret Negotiations: The Spy Figure in Nineteenth-century American Popular Fiction', in Wesley K. Wark (ed.), *Spy Fiction, Spy Films and Real Intelligence* (London: Frank Cass, 1991), pp.23-4.
7. 'Teeth of the Dragon', *The Shadow* 23/6, 15 Nov. 1937, p.48.
8. See Julie Wheelwright, 'Poisoned Honey: The Myth of Women in Espionage', *Queen's Quarterly* 100/2 (Summer 1993), pp.291-309.
9. For example, David Brion Davis sees the image of the wicked woman in nineteenth century American fiction in part as the result of anxiety over the changing status of women, while Virginia Mae Allen sees the image of the femme fatale in late nineteenth century paintings as a reaction to increasing feminist agitation. See Davis, *Homicide in American Fiction, 1978-1860: A Study in Social Values* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1957), pp.201-9, and Allen, *The Femme Fatale: A Study of the Early Development of the Concept in Mid-Nineteenth Century Poetry and Painting* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International 1979), pp.viii, 20-35.
10. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (NY: Basic 1988), 89. For a general discussion of gender constructions in international relations and national security studies, see J. Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (NY: Columbia UP 1992), and Jan Jindy Pettman, *Worlding Women: A Feminist International Politics* (London and NY: Routledge 1996).
11. *Ibid.*
12. Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 202.

13. See E. Ann Kaplan (ed.) *Women in Film Noir* (London: BFI Publishing 1980), especially pp.35–54. See also Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London and NY: Routledge, 1991).
14. See Nora Sayre, 'Cold-War Cinema II'. *The Nation*, 3 March 1979, p.245.
15. Herbert E. Krugman, 'The Interplay of Social and Psychological Factors in Political Deviance', PhD. dissertation, Columbia University, 1952, available on University Microfilms, p.111.
16. Morris L. Ernst and David Loth, *Report on the American Communist* (NY: Henry Holt, 1952), p.180.
17. Krugman, 'Interplay of Social and Psychological Factors in Political Deviance', 98–9.
18. Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (NY: Farrar & Rinehart 1942). For a discussion of Wylie's combination of 'momism' and anti-Communism, see Michael Paul Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press 1987), pp.242–45.
19. On gender and sexuality in the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA), see Rosalyn Baxandall, 'The Question Seldom Asked: Women and the CPUSA', in Michael E. Brown et al. *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993); Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press MA, 1998) pp.129–32; Van Gosse, 'To Organize in Every Neighborhood, in Every Home': The Gender Politics of American Communists between the Wars', *Radical History Review* 50 (Spring 1991): pp.109–41; Ellen Trimberger, 'Women in the Old and New Left: The Evolution of a Politics of Personal Life', *Feminist Studies* 5 (Fall 1979) pp.432–61; Elsa Dixler, 'The Woman Question: Women and the American Communist Party, 1929–1941', PhD dissertation, Yale, 1975; and Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001) pp.15–27.
20. See Kathryn Olmsted, *Red Spy Queen: Elizabeth Bentley and the Cold War at Home* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press 2002). For Bentley's two, lengthy statements to the FBI, see the Bentley-Silvermaster FBI file, 8 Nov. 1945, 100–17493–11, and 30 Nov. 1945, 65-56402-220. For an excellent discussion of Bentley's manipulation of traditional gender constructions, see Veronica A. Wilson, 'Elizabeth Bentley and Cold War Representation: Some Masks Not Dropped', *Intelligence and National Security* 14/2 (Summer 1999) pp.49–69.
21. See Olmsted, *Red Spy Queen*, (note 20) and Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev, *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America – the Stalin Era* (NY: Random House 1999), p.84.
22. 'Blonde Exposed Plotters', *New York Journal-American*, 21 July 1948.
23. 'Blonde Spy Testifies: White House Aide Gave Data', *New York Journal-American*, 31 July 1948; 'Probers Demand Ex-Spy Reveal All', *New York Journal-American*, 31 July 1948 (late edition).
24. Latham, *The Communist Controversy in Washington*, (note 4) p.160.
25. Murray Kempton, *Part of Our Time: Some Ruins and Monuments of the Thirties* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1955), pp.220n, 219.
26. See Robert J. Lamphere and Tom Schachtman, *The FBI-KGB War: A Special Agent's Story* (New York: Random House, 1986), pp.99–125, and Robert Louis Benson and Michael Warner (eds.), *Verona: Soviet Espionage and the American Response 1939–1957*, (Washington, D.C.: National Security Agency, 1996) p.403.
27. Quoted in 'Communists: Love Story', *Time*, 9 May 1949, p.27. For Coplon's trials, see *United States v. Coplon*, 185 F. 2d 629 (2d Cir. 1950) and *Coplon v. United States*. 191 F. 2d 749 (D.C. Cir. 1951). The first trial was microfilmed by the Fund for the Republic.
28. *United States v. Coplon* (Wilmington, DE.: Fund for the Republic 1978), 7647.
29. See *New York World Telegram*: 'Nail Brooklyn Girl in Spy Plot', 5 March 1949; 'Reds Yelp But U.S. Bars Spy Case Immunity', 9 March 1949; 'Coplon Girl and Russian Agent Indicted as Espionage Plotters', 10 March 1949; 'Miss Coplon Out of Bail, Denies Guilt in Spy Case', 11 March 1949.
30. See, for example, these *Journal-American* stories: 'More Spy Arrests Due', 7 March 1949; 'Fear U.S. Spy List Theft', 8 March 1949; and 'Quiz Judy on Kissless Dates', 22 June 1949.

31. All in *Washington Post*: 'coldly furious': 23 June 1949; 'grimace of hate' and 'figure of fury and flame': 25 June 1949.
32. All in *Washington Post*: 'stared hotly': 23 June 1949; 'burned' and 'cool hate': 25 June 1949; 'flowed out': 2 July 1949.
33. 'Judge Gives Mss Coplon 40 Months to 10 Years', *Washington Post*, 2 July 1949.
34. All in *Washington Post*: 'heaved': 23 June 1949; 'quivered': 25 June 1949; blouse 'inadequate to obscure': 25 June 1949.
35. See, for example, *New York Times* of 23 June 1949 ('shrill', 'hysterical'), 1 July 1949 ('unflinching', 'no sign of emotion', 'nervous', 'raging'), and 2 July 1949 ('bitter', 'cold').
36. Priscilla Hiss and Roberta Fansler, *Research in Fine Arts in the Colleges and Universities of the United States* (NY: Carnegie Corporation, 1934).
37. Friends quoted in John Chabot Smith, *Alger Hiss: The True Story* (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1976), pp.246–47; Meyer Zeligs, *Friendship and Fratricide: An Analysis of Whittaker Chambers and Alger Hiss* (NY: Viking 1967), p.183; Hede Massing, *This Deception* (NY: Duell, Sloane and Pearce 1951), p.175; and Harvey Bundy, Columbia University Oral History Collection, 305, 309.
38. Letter, Robert Cruise McManus to Alger Hiss, 31 Aug. 1948, Robert McManus folder, Sam Tanenhaus Papers, Hoover Institution. For other suspicions of Priscilla, see also in the Tanenhaus Papers: Anne Winslow's interview with Meyer Zeligs, 8 May 1963, Winslow folder; Richard Field's interview with Meyer Zeligs, 13 Oct. 1963, Field folder; William Marbury's interview with Allen Weinstein, 6 Aug. 1974, Marbury folder.
39. For the gossip that Priscilla was the real culprit, see Smith, *Alger Hiss*, (note 37) p.289; Tony Hiss, *Laughing Last*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1977), pp.2, 135; Zeligs, *Friendship and Fratricide*, (note 37) p.406; Allen Weinstein, *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case* (NY: Random House 1997), pp.338, 344; and Sam Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers* (NY: Random House 1997), p. 392.
40. For the Priscilla/Chambers rumor, see Tony Hiss, *Laughing Last*, (note 39) p.2. For the Henry Collins rumor, see 'Memo of a conversation with Alger Hiss', 11 September 1974, Allen Weinstein folder, Sam Tanenhaus Papers, Hoover Institution.
41. Sam Tanenhaus interview with Jack Danahy, 28 Sept. 1994, Danahy folder, Sam Tanenhaus papers, Hoover Institution.
42. Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (NY: Random House 1952), p.359; Smith, *Alger Hiss*, (note 37) p.245.
43. Nixon, *Six Crises* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday 1962), p.38.
44. Richard Nixon, 'Lessons of the Alger Hiss Case', *New York Times*, 8 Jan. 1986, A23.
45. Ralph De Toledano and Victor Lasky, *Seeds of Treason* (Chicago: Henry Regnery 1962).
46. *Ibid.* pp.37, 39.
47. *Ibid.* p.39.
48. Kempton, *Part of Our Time*, 21.
49. Lionel Trilling, *The Middle of the Journey* (NY: Viking 1947).
50. '3 A-Bomb Spies Convicted', *New York World-Telegram*, 29 March 1951.
51. Bob Considine, 'Rosenbergs Worked Hard to Become Red A-Spies,' *New York Journal-American*, 12 Jan. 1953.
52. Howard Rushmore, 'A-spy and Wife Sentenced to Die,' *New York Journal-American*, 5 April 1951. See also James Daniel, 'Why Did Rosenbergs Betray Own Country?' *New York World-Telegram and Sun*, 14 Jan. 1953.
53. Ilene Philipson, *Ethel Rosenberg: Beyond the Myths* (NY: Franklin Watts 1988), pp.258–64, 321–25, 329; Virginia Gardner, *The Rosenberg Story* (NY: Masses and Mainstream 1954), pp.73–8.
54. FBI Rosenberg File, #1258, 29 Feb. 1952 and #922, 14 March 1951. See also Philipson, *Ethel Rosenberg*, (note 53) pp.154–8, 183–6; Robert and Michael Meeropol, *We Are Your Sons: The Legacy of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1986), pp.91–5; Gardner, *The Rosenberg Story*, (note 53) pp.67–9.
55. James Daniel, 'Mrs. Rosenberg Was Like a Red Spider', *New York World-Telegram and Sun*, 15 Jan. 1953.

56. Bob Considine, 'Rosenbergs Worked Hard to Become Red A-Spies', 12 Jan. 1953; 'The Inside Story of Two A-Spies', *New York Journal-American*, 11 Jan. 1953.
57. 'Last Appeal', *Time*, 29 June 1953, p.7.
58. Howard Rushmore, 'A-Spy and Wife Sentenced to Die,' *New York Journal-American*, 5 April 1951.
59. Bob Considine, *It's All News to Me: A Reporter's Deposition* (NY: Meredith Press, 1967), p.169.
60. Damon Runyon Jr, 'Ethel 2d Woman Doomed by U.S.: Drab 'Mata Hari' to Make History', *New York Journal-American*, 6 April 1951.
61. Bob Considine, 'How A-Spies Died!' *New York Journal-American*, 20 June 1953.
62. 'Mrs. Rosenberg Was Like a Red Spider,' *New York World-Telegram and Sun*, 15 Jan 1953.
63. Louis Nizer, *The Implosion Conspiracy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1973), p.19.
64. E.L. Doctorow, *The Book of Daniel* (New York: Plume, 1971, 1996). See esp. pp. 41, 46, 296.
65. Robert Meeropol, 'Rosenberg Realities', in Marjorie Garber and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (eds.), *Secret Agents: The Rosenberg Case, McCarthyism, and Fifties America* (New York: Routledge 1995), p.245. For examples, see plates 6, 36, and 43 in Rob A. Okun (ed.), *The Rosenbergs: Collected Visions of Artists and Writers* (NY: Universe Books 1988).
66. FBI Rosenberg File, #944, director to Attorney General, 2 April 1951, 1. The same phrase is used in #947, Ladd to director, 2 April 1951, 2, and #946, Ladd to director, 3 April 1951. The latter memo notes that Ethel's participation in espionage was 'substantially less than that of Julius Rosenberg'.
67. See the three memos cited above as well as #945, W.M. Whelan to director, 3 April 1951, and no serial number, director to Tolson, Ladd, Nichols, Belmont, 2 April 1951. All the FBI officials whose memos are preserved in the Bureau files – Hoover, Mickey Ladd, Peyton Ford, and W.M. Whelan – opposed the death penalty for Ethel. See also Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton, *The Rosenberg File*, 2d edn. (New Haven, CT: Yale 1997), pp.279–82, and Curt Gentry, *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets* (NY: Penguin, 1992), pp.421–28.
68. Radosh and Milton, *Rosenberg File*, (note 67) p.358.
69. *Ibid.* p.281.
70. Sheila Brennan, 'Popular Images of American Women in the 1950s and Their Impact on Ethel Rosenberg's Trial and Conviction', *Women's Rights Law Reporter*, 14/1 (Winter 1992) p.62. See also Marie Ashe, 'The *Bell Jar* and the Ghost of Ethel Rosenberg', in Garber and Walkowitz (note 65), *Secret Agents*, 217.
71. Quoted in Radosh and Milton, *The Rosenberg File*, (note 67) p.378.
72. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953–1956* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1963), p.225.
73. The limited references to Ethel in the Soviet archives are found in *The Haunted Wood*, (note 21) pp.217 and 331. Julius's KGB case officer, Alexander Feklisov, says that Julius worked for him, but that Ethel was not an active spy. See Alessandra Stanley, 'Ex-KGB Spy Talks of Buying Secrets from Rosenberg', *San Francisco Examiner*, 16 March 1997. Feklisov also repeated this view of Ethel on camera for the Discovery Channel documentary 'The Rosenberg File: Case Closed' (c. Discovery Communications, Inc., 1998). On Julius's guilt, see Walter and Miriam Schneir, 'Cryptic Answers', *Nation*, 14/21 Aug. 1995, pp.152–3.
74. Robert C. Ruark, 'Not the Type', *New York World-Telegram*, 7 March 1949.