

Topic page:

espionage

The act of obtaining information clandestinely. The term applies particularly to the act of collecting military, industrial, and political data about one nation for the benefit of another. Industrial espionage—the theft of patents and processes from business firms—is not properly espionage at all.

Modern Espionage

Espionage is a part of intelligence activity, which is also concerned with analysis of diplomatic reports, newspapers, periodicals, technical publications, commercial statistics, and radio and television broadcasts. In the last fifty years espionage activity has been greatly supplemented by technological advances, especially in the areas of radio signal interception and high-altitude photography. Surveillance with high-technology equipment on the ground or from high-altitude planes and satellites has become an important espionage technique (see [Cuban Missile Crisis](#)). Code making and code breaking (see [cryptography](#)) have become computerized and very effective. The threat of foreign espionage is used as an excuse for internal suppression and the suspension of civil rights in many countries. Espionage is a very important part of [guerrilla warfare](#) and counterinsurgency. The defensive side of intelligence activity, i.e., preventing another nation from gaining such information, is known as counterespionage. Under international law, intelligence activities are not illegal; however, every nation has laws against espionage conducted against it.

History

Beginnings through the Nineteenth Century

The importance of espionage in military affairs has been recognized since the beginning of recorded history. The Egyptians had a well-developed secret service, and spying and subversion are mentioned in the *Iliad* and in the Bible. The ancient Chinese treatise (c.500 B.C.) on the art of war (see [Sun Tzu](#)) devotes much attention to deception and intelligence gathering, arguing that all war is based on deception. In the Middle Ages, political espionage became important. [Joan of Arc](#) was betrayed by Bishop Pierre Cauchon of Beauvais, a spy in the pay of the English, and Sir Francis Walsingham developed an efficient political spy system for [Elizabeth I](#). With the growth of the modern national state, systematized espionage became a fundamental part of government in most countries. Joseph [Fouché](#) is credited with developing the first modern political espionage system, and Frederick II of Prussia is regarded as the founder of modern military espionage. During the American Revolution, Nathan [Hale](#) and Benedict [Arnold](#) achieved fame as spies, and there was considerable use of spies on both sides during the U.S. Civil War.

In the Twentieth Century

By World War I, all the great powers except the United States had elaborate civilian espionage systems and all national military establishments had intelligence units. To protect the country against foreign agents, the U.S. Congress passed the Espionage Statute of 1917. [Mata Hari](#), who obtained information for Germany by seducing French officials, was the most noted espionage agent of World War I. Germany and Japan established elaborate espionage nets in the years preceding World War II. In 1942 the Office of Strategic Services was founded by Gen. William J. [Donovan](#). However, the British system was the keystone of Allied intelligence.

Since World War II, espionage activity has enlarged considerably, much of it growing out of the [cold war](#) between the United States and the former USSR. Russia and the Soviet Union have had a long tradition of espionage ranging from the Czar's Okhrana to the Committee for State Security (the KGB), which also acted as a [secret police](#) force. In the United States the 1947 National Security Act created the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) (CIA) to coordinate intelligence and the [National Security Agency](#) for research into codes and electronic communication. In addition to these, the United States has 13 other intelligence gathering agencies; most of the U.S. expenditures for intelligence gathering are budgeted to various Defense Dept. agencies and their programs. Under the intelligence reorganization of 2004, the director of national intelligence is responsible for overseeing and coordinating the activities and budgets of the U.S. intelligence agencies.

Famous cold war espionage cases include Alger [Hiss](#) and Whittaker [Chambers](#) and the [Rosenberg Case](#). In 1952 the Communist Chinese captured two CIA agents, and in 1960 Francis Gary Powers, flying a U-2 reconnaissance mission over the Soviet Union for the CIA, was shot down and captured. During the cold war, many Soviet intelligence officials defected

to the West, including Gen. Walter Krivitsky, Victor Kravchenko, Vladimir Petrov, Peter Deriabin Pawel Monat, and Oleg Penkovsky, of the GRU (Soviet military intelligence). Among Western officials who defected to the Soviet Union are Guy F. Burgess and Donald D. Maclean of Great Britain in 1951, Otto John of West Germany in 1954, William H. Martin and Bernon F. Mitchell, U.S. cryptographers, in 1960, and Harold (Kim) [Philby](#) of Great Britain in 1962. U.S. acknowledgment of its U-2 flights and the exchange of Francis Gary Powers for Rudolf Abel in 1962 implied the legitimacy of some espionage as an arm of foreign policy.

China has a very cost-effective intelligence program that is especially effective in monitoring neighboring countries. Smaller countries can also mount effective and focused espionage efforts. The Vietnamese Communists, for example, had consistently superior intelligence during the [Vietnam War](#). Israel probably has the best espionage establishment in the world. Some of the Muslim countries, especially Libya, Iran, and Syria, have highly developed operations as well. Iran's Savak was particularly feared by Iranian dissidents before the Iranian Revolution.

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Definition

espionage from *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary*

noun: the activity of spying, or the use of spies to gather information.

[18c: from French *espionnage*, from *espion* spy.]



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