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1900 1910 1920 1930 1940 1950 1960 1970 1980

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[teachers](#)
[discussion](#)
[bibliography](#)
[games & puzzles](#)
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[contact us](#)

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[episode summaries](#)
[tv schedule](#)
[merchandise](#)
[press releases](#)
[behind the scenes](#)
[audio / video](#)

Soviet Spy Scandal

News of a widespread spy ring in Canada cools relations with the Soviet Union

In September 1945, a young Russian man symbolically ushered in the Cold War when he walked into Ottawa newsroom and announced he had proof of a widespread Soviet spy ring operating in Canada.



In 1945, Igor Gouzenko and his family received new identities from the Canadian government after the young Russian Embassy cipher clerk announced he had proof of a widespread spy ring in Canada. Pictured here, Gouzenko wears a hood to conceal his identity while appearing on television in 1966. (National Archives of Canada, PA-129625)

"It's war. It's Russia," he told the night editor of the Ottawa Journal.

Hitler's fascist forces had just been defeated in the Second World War. And the Soviet Union had been an ally to the West during the war. But this event would help fuel anti-Communist sentiments throughout the western world.

The man who touched off the political crisis was Igor Gouzenko. Gouzenko had spent part of the Second World War at the Soviet Embassy in Canada, as a cipher clerk, encoding communications to Moscow.

In 1945, Gouzenko received orders to return to the Soviet Union, but disillusioned with his communist homeland and attracted by life in the West, he decided to stay.

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He plotted his escape for several weeks, stealing classified material that he could use to ingratiate himself with his Canadian hosts.

"During the course of about half a month, I examined the materials so as to select the best ones that would disclose the operative work, leaving the informational telegrams on one side," he wrote, "the telegrams which I wished to take out I marked by bending over slightly one of the corners."

The information revealed a spy ring had operated in Canada during the war. It involved civil servants, scientists, even a Member of Parliament. The Soviets were trying to get information about North American technology including the atom bomb.

On September 5, 1945, Gouzenko stuffed 109 documents under his shirt and walked to the newsroom of the Ottawa Journal. He confronted the night editor, Chester Frowde.

"The first words he spoke were: 'It's war. It's Russia'. Well, that didn't ring a bell with me because World War II was over and we were not at war with Russia."

The editor told him to go to the police, but Gouzenko went to the Department of Justice instead, which was closed. The next morning, he went back to the Journal and spoke to reporter Elizabeth Fraser.

By noon, the Canadian government was aware of Gouzenko and Mackenzie King was informed of the incident.

Canada was about to meet with the Soviets, Britain, France and the United States to discuss and construct a post-war peace, and King was worried that this scandal would damage international relations.

"It was like a bomb on top of everything else," King wrote, "and one could not say how serious it might be or where it might lead."

Later that day Gouzenko applied for Canadian citizenship, then wandered around Ottawa, unsuccessfully seeking asylum. At that point, the Canadian government was unclear how to act on the unfolding developments. But the Soviets were now aware of the theft and were looking for Gouzenko.

That night, Gouzenko and his family stayed with a neighbour. Just before midnight four men from the Soviet embassy broke into the apartment searching for Gouzenko and his documents. The Ottawa police quickly arrived, followed by the RCMP and staff from External Affairs.

The Canadian government finally offered Gouzenko and his family the asylum he sought.

His story remained secret for five months while an investigation was conducted into the activities of suspected spies named in the documents, most of them civil servants. In February 1946, arrests were made.

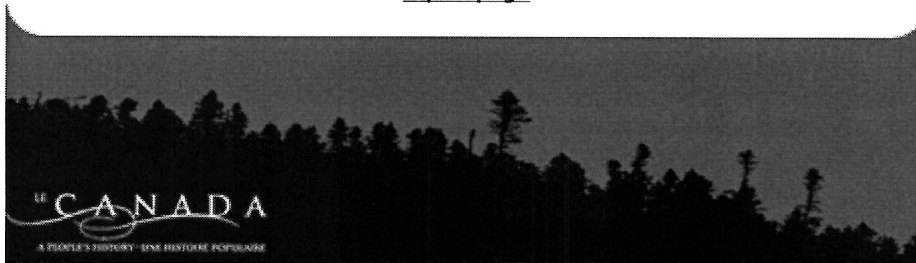
Israel Halperin, a mathematician who did military research, was arrested and detained for five weeks without charge, and questioned by a Royal Commission, not knowing whether he was a suspect or a witness.

Twenty people were eventually sent to trial. Nine were acquitted, including Dr. Halperin. Fred Rose, a Communist Member of Parliament, was convicted of spying for the Soviets, and sentenced to six years. All spend the rest of their lives under suspicion, their reputations tarnished.

The Gouzenko spy scandal reverberated throughout the world. In the United States as in Canada, there was heightened suspicion and paranoia of communist spies. A more lasting legacy of Gouzenko's revelations was an increased distrust between the Soviet Union and the West, helping ignite the Cold War.

Gouzenko and his family were given a new identity. In 1948, he wrote his memoirs entitled *This Was My Choice*. Gouzenko occasionally emerged in the public spotlight but he but always wore a hood over his face to conceal his identity. He died in 1982.

[top of page](#)



Current Topic:

Soviet Spy Scandal

Next Topic:

[The Red Scare](#)

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