Espionage Act Of 1917 Essay, Research Paper

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Espionage was rampant in the early 1900’s. Citizens made significant sacrifices “to make the world safe for democracy(2).” Americans were also alert to the presence of spies who could sabotage the war effort. Congress passed the Espionage Act on June 15, 1917. The law provided stiff penalties for those found guilty of aiding the German enemy and increased public rancor toward Germany and all things German.

Espionage is defined as 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(4). Espionage was a major undertaking for many nations during the era of the Cold War, which lasted from about 1946 until 1990. Because the world was divided into hostile camps, dominated by the two superpowers–the United States and the Soviet Union–the Cold War made espionage a vital undertaking in order to protect national security and to help prevent a major war. The embassies and consulates of the United States were used as headquarters for the gathering of military and industrial secrets of other nations, particularly the Soviet Union and its allies. With the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the excesses of Cold War espionage ended. But the intelligence-gathering organizations that conducted espionage did not go out of business. There were still many trouble spots in the world that merited attention

Espionage is the secret gathering of information about a rival, but very often the spying is done on friendly or neutral countries as well. There is also a type of intelligence gathering called industrial espionage: the stealing of trade secrets from one company by another in order to profit by the information. Not all espionage is a secret, furtive activity with the romance and thrills of a “James Bond” movie. Much intelligence work is a slow, painstaking, and tedious business engaged in by the employees of national intelligence agencies such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States or the former Soviet KGB.

During the Cold War it was easier for spies from the Soviet Union and its allies to work in the United States, Western Europe, and Japan than it was for American or other Western spies to gather information in the Soviet Union, China, and the Eastern-bloc nations. The Soviet Union was a closed society. Every area of public life was under government control, and private lives were always subject to government surveillance. All publications were monitored, and there was little access to information that the government did not want released. For any nation to set up an elaborate spy network within the Soviet Union was virtually impossible(2).

The 1917 law provided steep fines and imprisonment for collecting and transmitting to a foreign power information related to U.S. National defense and for interfering with the recruitment or loyalty of the armed forces. There was a revision of the law in the 1940’s and increased its penalties. During World War II about 160 people were convicted under the Espionage Act(1).