

‘The past is not the past, it is present’: illustrative case studies – intentionally historicising geopolitics in the history classroom through storytelling, thereby facilitating the process of ‘connecting the dots’ over time and space

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In suggesting ‘the past is not past, it is present’, and as part of a continuous journey of professional development, this paper will argue the need for the history teacher to intentionally historicise geopolitics, while unpacking both the General Education and Training (GET) and Further Education and Training (FET) curricula, to enable the learner to connect the dots over time and space.

In 2025, few remaining history teachers can historicize geopolitics through their own experience. Most rely on intentionally reading beyond the curriculum and delving deeper into it.

The Islamic Republic of Iran – An illustrative contemporary issue: US and Israel bombing of nuclear facilities

On 22 June 2025, the United States (US) Air Force and Navy attacked nuclear facilities in Iran as part of a regional war, under the code name of Operation Midnight Hammer. A question could be posed about how this development can be engaged in the history classroom. The intentional choice of the history teacher could be to either focus on the region of the Middle East itself or focus on the post-World War II nuclear arms race in the broad context of the Cold War.

Nicole Grajewski (2025) argues that the fundamental limitation of the strikes lies in the distinction between infrastructure damage and capability elimination. Military action can

destroy equipment and facilities, but it cannot eliminate knowledge, dispersed materials, or the underlying strategic drivers of nuclear weapons development. It is this analysis and observation which informs the approach of this current paper.

Using the work of both Nancy Thorndike Greenspan (2021) and Henning Van Aswegen and Peter Swanepoel (2025), explanatory and illustrative case studies in the form of storytelling will be provided as we historicize the targeting of nuclear facilities.

In telling the story of Klaus Fucks in *Atomic Spy*, which Thorndike Greenspan (2021) describes as a cautionary tale about the ambiguity of morality and loyalty, many questions can be posed in the history classroom. The consequent discussions and answers to these questions are where understanding and knowledge are gained.

Skiing ‘off-piste’, through storytelling

The telling of the story can begin when Klaus Fucks died from cancer in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) on 28 January 1988. By 1988, Michael Gorbachev was the Chairman of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the Cold War was coming to an end and social unrest was developing in the Soviet Satellite States, where people were calling for similar social reforms to those of *Glasnost* in the Soviet Union—a topic in the Grade 12 curriculum.

The state funeral for Fucks took place on 11 February at the *Friedrichsfelde* Cemetery in East Berlin, which was the resting place of honoured socialist leaders, starting with Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, murdered during the Weimar unrest that first roused Klaus Fucks to activism (Thorndike Greenspan, 2021). No high-level Soviet official attended his funeral, except one guest who was thirty-five-year-old Vladimir Putin, a KGB agent stationed in Dresden. Putin, the President of the Russian Federation, is a character who features in current geopolitics.

Thorndike Greenspan (2021) explains, in March 1988, a white-haired man dressed sombrely in a grey suit and dark overcoat walked on a dirt path along *Pergolenbergweg* in Berlin—in his right hand was a small bouquet of Shasta daisies. In the *Friedrichsfelde* Cemetery, he searched for something... on reaching it, leaned the daisies against the stone, and knelt. He was in front of the grave of Klaus Fucks. The man, Alexander Feklisov, bowed three times: The first was to acknowledge his gratitude for having met Fucks; the second was on behalf of the Soviet people; and the third was to reflect the gratitude of all the people of the world.

He then met Grete Keilson, the wife of the now deceased Fucks and herself a former senior member of the GDR state. She asked Feklisov why he had now, in 1988, come to Berlin as Feklisov and Fucks had not seen each other since their last meeting in London, in April 1949? Feklisov had been in the Soviet Union for all the years Fucks had been in the GDR, but had not contacted Fucks. Feklisov did not have an answer to her question (Thorndike Greenspan, 2021). It suggests that when Feklisov returned to the Soviet Union, he was never requested by the KGB to reactivate Fucks, even after Fucks had returned to the GDR. The Soviet authorities never acknowledged the role of Fucks in enabling them to develop a nuclear capacity by 1949 to compete with the US, arguing they developed the capacity through their own scientists in the Soviet Union.

Thorndike Greenspan (2021) argues that Feklisov had recorded in his memoir his final thought on Klaus Fucks: *“Science without conscience is only ruin for the soul”*.

A brief background to the early life and schooling of Klaus Fucks while in Germany

Thorndike Greenspan (2021) explains that Fucks was born on 29 December 1911, in Rüsselheim, just south of Frankfurt, in Germany. This was just before World War 1 (WW1), a topic in the Grade 8 curriculum. His father, Emil Fucks, was a Lutheran preacher. The family moved to Eisenach as WW1 ended. Fucks had a younger sister, Kristel, an older brother, Gerhard, and the eldest sibling, Elisabeth. The former two will feature in Klaus's subsequent story.

By the end of WW1, a radical faction within the Social Democratic Party (SPD) led to the moderates maintaining the SPD name, and the radicals ultimately became the Communist Party of Germany, the KPD. This period of Weimar Germany is a topic in the Grade 9 curriculum. In the political, social and economic chaos of the early period of Weimar Germany, Emil Fucks, like many others, was sympathetic to workers' rights—all of whom were automatically identified as 'red' and treated accordingly by university students in right-wing paramilitary groups.

From 1921, Klaus attended Eisenach's Gymnasium, where he excelled in mathematics. In 1928, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Weimar Republic, the government announced an award of a special history book to the top student in each city. Klaus Fucks won the prize for Eisenach. However, the headmaster gave the award to him in private as he considered Emil Fucks's politics were too well-known and provocative for a presentation to the son, Klaus, before the Gymnasium's conservative students. This observation by

Thorndike Greenspan (2021) provides an opening through which discussion can take place over the extent of the fascist mobilisation of learners in schools by 1928. Fucks graduated from the Gymnasium in 1929, as the Wall Street crash unfolded, leading to the Great Depression—a topic in the Grade 11 curriculum.

University studies, involvement in the communist party student wing and the impact of the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany

In 1930, Fucks registered at the university in Leipzig to study mathematics and physics, where he joined his brother, Gerhard, who had enrolled at the university two years before. Both Gerhard and Klaus joined the Socialist Students Union, an affiliate of the SPD, as well as the *Reichsbanner*, a paramilitary group closely allied with the Social Democrats. In 1931, the two brothers transferred to Kiel after their father had joined the Pedagogical Academy in Kiel and had become a Quaker. At the university, the brothers formed a coalition of socialist and communist students against Nazi fascism, which was known as the Free Socialist Students Group. In 1932, with national politics seeing the rise of the Nazi Party, Klaus transferred to the local youth KPD chapter. Therefore, in the early 1930s, both Fucks brothers were involved with the communist party student wing, within which they had leadership positions, and were known to the nascent Gestapo.

Thorndike Greenspan (2021) explains that when Gerhard transferred to the University of Berlin, Klaus became the leader of the Free Socialist Student Group in Kiel. On 30 January 1933, Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany. The Nazi student leadership in Kiel sentenced Klaus Fucks to death, resulting in Klaus and his sister, Elizabeth, going into hiding. By 28 February, with news of the *Reichstag* fire circulating in Germany, the targeting, by the Gestapo, of perceived communists intensified, with Klaus Fucks being on the list in Kiel.

Thorndike Greenspan (2021) explains that at this stage, in 1933, Guy Liddel of Britain's MI5 arrived in Berlin, where he prioritised getting lists of known communists in Germany. The state security agency of Britain did not identify the rise of fascism in central Europe as a threat to peace, but communism. This fact would have an impact on the choices Klaus Fucks will make, and a bearing on his story, which continues to unfold.

Into exile and a refugee from Nazism, in Britain

Klaus Fucks left Kiel and went underground in Berlin. In mid-July 1933, he fled Berlin on

his journey into exile. He caught a train to the German / Belgian border, crossed the border on foot, and headed to Paris. While in Paris, he worked with Grete Keilson on the youth congress and attended the September 1933 World Congress of Youth Against War and Fascism as a KPD delegate.

According to Thorndike Greenspan (2021), Klaus Fucks then caught a ferry to Britain, where, as a refugee from Nazism, he was granted a landing permit as he had a *letter of invitation* to study theoretical physics at the University of Bristol. While in Bristol, he made contact with KPD émigrés in London. In 1936, Fucks had completed his undergraduate degree, received approval for a PhD, and published several academic articles. The Gestapo had forwarded details of the background of Klaus Fucks, as they did with many other German refugees, to the German consulate, which provided these details to Britain's MI5.

Klaus Fucks transferred to the University of Edinburgh in 1937. By July 1939, he applied to become a naturalised British citizen, however, the outbreak of World War 2 (WW2) stopped the process, and his category was changed from refugee to “enemy alien”.

By 1940, with fears in Britain of possible German invasion of the United Kingdom and related security concerns of a *Fifth Column* of Nazi sympathisers and agents of Germany in Britain, “enemy aliens” were interned, including Klaus Fucks. Fucks was initially held in Huyton, where he met another internee, Hans Kahle (who worked for the Soviet GRU), and they were then shipped to an internment camp on the Isle of Man. By July 1940, the internees were transported by ship to Canada. Thorndike Greenspan (2021) describes the concentration camp-like conditions in which the internees were held in Huyton, the Isle of Man and Canada and, irrespective of their ideological backgrounds and therefore, reason for fleeing Nazi Germany, they were held together.

The 1941 context in which Klaus Fucks was recruited to work for Soviet intelligence

With the imminent threat of a Nazi invasion of the United Kingdom having waned, in mid-December Fucks and a group of internees were shipped back to Britain from Canada, arriving in Liverpool on 13 January 1941.

Shortly after he arrived in Britain, Fucks met Simon Kremmer, a Soviet official, in London. By May 1941, he was working in Birmingham on atomic research and meeting Kremmer, known to him as 'Alexander', to hand over information. In 1942, Kremmer was recalled to the Soviet Union, and Ursula Kuczynski, code name 'Sonya', became Fucks's GRU handler. In these meetings, Fucks handed over information and documents which he himself had authored.

Thorndike Greenspan (2021) highlights the June 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union with Operation Barbarossa and the August signing of the Atlantic Charter between Churchill and Roosevelt in Newfoundland, as two seminal developments in which the choice made by Fucks should be understood. In the case of the latter, the secret, scientific agreement which was part of the Atlantic Charter meant Fucks, a scientist involved in nuclear research, related to the Soviet Union as an ally in the war against Nazi fascism. While Churchill wanted the agreement to create public support to propel the Americans into the war, news of the charter did not move the Americans to enter the war. It was only the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, on 7 December 1941, which did.

Bilateral agreement to build an atomic bomb in 1943, the 'Manhattan Project', Fucks to the US and the 'Verona' intercept, which alludes to a Soviet spy

Initiated on 1 February 1943, VERONA was a top-secret decoding project run by the US Army Signal Intelligence Service (later absorbed into the National Security Agency), as a means of decrypting messages transmitted by Soviet intelligence agencies. This US capability will be featured in Fuchs's subsequent story.

Thorndike Greenspan (2021) also explains that the British and Americans reached a consensus on a mutual effort to build an atomic bomb in August 1943, when the countries signed the top-secret Quebec Agreement, which was not made known even to the US Congress. This agreement will result in bringing Fucks to the USA.

The Army Corps of Engineers under General Leslie Groves controlled the project, with the US and British mutual effort to build an atomic bomb. The East Coast headquarters of the corps was at 270 Broadway in New York City—its location supplied the 'Manhattan' part of the project title.

On 3 December 1943, members of the British scientific mission, including Klaus Fucks, arrived by boat in the US, and General Groves had been assured by the British

representative in the US that “the British Security had cleared all these people” (Thorndike Greenspan, 2021, 144). Meanwhile, intelligence staff at the Moscow Centre had received a lengthy brief from the GRU on its history with Klaus Fucks in London. The brief attested to his credentials and values. On handing Fucks over to the *Narodnyy komissariat vnutrennikh del* (Peoples Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) (forerunner of the KGB), the GRU advised them that he took no pay, but sometimes accepted monetary gifts.

The NKVD in New York had failed to infiltrate US war research. The memo sent to them from Moscow Centre proclaimed: “As an agent, ‘Rest’ is a major figure with considerable opportunities and experience in agent work”. However, they were also warned about the threat of US counterintelligence and the GRU, which had handed over ‘Rest’, as it was not “known for its discretion” (Thorndike Greenspan, 2021:147).

On 5 February 1944, Klaus Fucks met with a Soviet cut-out. Fucks had the code name of “REST”, and the Soviet cut-out was known to Fucks as “Raymond”—his actual name was Harry Gold. Fucks explained his assignment on isotope separation, explained that in addition to work in Manhattan, research was taking place in Berkley, California and at a place referred to as Camp Y, in New Mexico. Fucks told ‘Raymond’ that results were expected in 1945.

‘Raymond’ handed off his report to ‘John’, an intelligence operative at the Soviet consulate in New York, who forwarded an encrypted message to the NKVD’s Moscow Centre. It is this encrypted message which VERONA intercepted ... however, the US Army Signals Intelligence Service took the next few years to decipher it.

In September 1944, with the war in Europe turning in the Allies’ favour, Churchill and Roosevelt had secretly agreed that when a ‘bomb’ is finally available, it might perhaps, after mature consideration, be used against the Japanese (Thorndike Greenspan, 2021:165). In April 1945, German strength began to collapse, the concentration camps were liberated and both Hitler and Mussolini died. On 7 May 1945, Germany surrendered unconditionally. The scientists involved in the atomic research had rationalised their participation, only because of the urgent need to rid the world of Hitler and the Nazis.

‘Trinity’ and the Potsdam Conference

However, research continued, and it was agreed that with a complex plutonium bomb, only a test would prove it viable. Oppenheimer set 16 July 1945 as the test date for the plutonium bomb, nicknamed the ‘Gadget’. On 2 June 1945, Klaus Fucks, now based at Los

Alamos, New Mexico, met with 'Raymond' to hand over documents, including the plans for the plutonium bomb, which was to be tested on 16 July 1945.

The plutonium bomb was tested, known as 'Trinity', on 16 July 1945, with Fucks present. The next day, 17 July, Truman met with Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin at Potsdam, Germany. When Truman informed them of the test, Stalin received little reaction. Thorndike Greenspan (2021) explains that neither Truman nor anyone else there appreciated that Stalin knew almost as much about the bomb and the Trinity test as they did.

With the formal signing of Japan's surrender on 2 September 1945, WW2 was entirely over, and the British mission in Los Alamos was ready to go home, including Klaus Fucks.

Post-WW2, and Klaus Fucks back in the United Kingdom

On his return to the United Kingdom, Fucks was assigned as a scientist to Harwell, where research into the development of a British atomic bomb was being undertaken. Thorndike Greenspan (2021) argues he did not make contact with a Soviet agent until 1947, six months after he had returned to the UK.

Thorndike Greenspan (2021) explains, Klaus Fucks cut ties in February 1949 by missing a rendezvous with his last NKVD Soviet handler, Alexander Fexlisov. This is the year in which the Berlin Crisis unfolded, the North Atlantic Treaty was launched and the Soviet Union joined the atomic age with the successful explosion of a device. These issues are unpacked in the Grade 12 curriculum. MI5 never identified Fexlisov.

In January 1950, Klaus Fucks confessed to MI5 that he had been providing information to the Soviets from mid-1942 (his actual espionage began in August 1941) until early 1949.

On 2 February 1950, Fucks was arrested and on 10 February charged in court with two charges of violating the Official Secrets Act. He was committed for trial at the Old Bailey, beginning 28 February. His trial lasted all of one hour and twenty-eight minutes. Fucks was given the maximum sentence ordained by parliament for this crime, fourteen years' imprisonment.

Developments in the US in 1950

In May 1950, the FBI arrested Harry Gold in the US, who eventually acknowledged he was the person who received information from Klaus Fucks while Fucks was in the US. In addition, Harry Gold provided the name of David Greenglass, a machinist at Los Alamos

working on lenses for the plutonium bomb, and Greenglass's name led to his brother-in-law, Julius Rosenberg, who was an engineer living in New York, and his wife, Ethel, both of whom were executed for the crime of espionage. However, neither the Rossenbergs nor Greenglass had the scientific understanding of Klaus Fucks. These developments in the USA took place in the context of the unfolding Korean War (1950-1953) and the hearings of Senator McCarthy, which again relate to the Grade 12 curriculum.

Fuchs's release on parole in 1958, and his final years in the GDR

In 1958, the British government began to contemplate Klaus Fuchs's release on parole. He was now stateless, with his naturalised British citizenship having been revoked. Fucks insisted that the only country he would consider going to was the GDR (East Germany) or, if it were not an option, he would consider India or Brazil. It was finally agreed that he would leave on 23 June 1958 on a Polish airliner from London Airport to Schönefeld Airport in East Berlin. Fucks became the Deputy Director of the Central Institute for Nuclear Research in the GDR.

While Fucks was in the GDR, apartheid South Africa's nuclear ambitions unfolded

Van Aswegen and Swanepoel (2025) explain that on the instructions of the Soviet Union's GRU, Dieter Felix Gerhardt visited the *Vastrap* nuclear weapons site in South Africa in early 1977 to determine what progress had been made by South Africa to develop or obtain a nuclear bomb. As a result, a Soviet spy satellite was identified flying over the *Vastrap* atomic weapons site. The Soviets supplied this information to both the US and France to bring pressure on South Africa to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which South Africa refused to do, and the refusal "angered President Jimmy Carter of the United States, who wrote several threatening letters to the South African government on this matter" (Van Aswegen & Swanepoel, 2025:289). These developments took place in South Africa, covering topics unpacked in the Grade 12 curriculum.

The Atomic Energy Corporation in South Africa had, in 1961, begun the development of a nuclear enrichment capability at two vast facilities west of Tshwane (former Pretoria), *Pelindaba* and *Valindaba*, with its first highly enriched uranium being produced in 1978. Meanwhile, a Canadian Professor, Hugh George Hambleton, of Laval University in Quebec, supplied the Soviet KGB with information in 1978, confirming the location of South

Africa's nuclear enrichment and its cooperation with Israel (Van Aswegen & Swanepoel, 2025:286). Hambleton's information that "South Africa had amassed all the requisite resources and facilities to produce an atomic bomb which exceeded the destructive force capability of the Nagasaki plutonium bomb" (Van Aswegen & Swanepoel, 2025:286) and which Fucks had been involved in and provided the information thereon to the Soviet Union.

Hambleton had been recruited by the NKVD (forerunner of the KGB) in 1951 by Vladimir Borodin and joined NATO's Economic Directorate in Paris in 1957, where he supplied the KGB with NATO-related documents. In the 1970s, he accessed information about both Israel's and South Africa's nuclear weapons programmes and collaboration. Hambleton was arrested in September 1979 in Canada, and eventually sentenced to ten years in prison.

The ANC Research Unit in London, under Frene Ginwala, also investigated apartheid South Africa's nuclear weapons programme at this time, using Renfrew Christie to do academic research in South Africa. Christie was sent to South Africa in 1979 and spied on South Africa's nuclear programme. Three months after Christie's arrival, he was arrested under the Terrorism Act. He was interrogated and tortured by the Security Branch of the South African Police. On 6 June 1980, Christie was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment, with four other sentences of five years each to run concurrently. In Christie's so-called 'confession', he put down all his recommendations to the ANC. The judge read his confession into the official record, which aided in his recommendations to be printed and spread, via the hands of democratic lawyers, to the ANC in London (SA History Online, 2025). One of his recommendations to the ANC had been to bomb Koeberg just before they put uranium in it. "Rodney (Wilkinson) bombed Koeberg in 1982; two and a half years after I was in prison. Frankly, when I heard of it, it made being in prison much easier to tolerate", explained Christie in an interview during the Conference on Anti-Nuclear Activism in Africa, 3 April 2023 (The Thinker, 2024:205). This topic is unpacked in the Grade 12 curriculum.

Post-script – Klaus Fuchs's own reflective evaluation of his choices, and Renfrew Christie comments on the bombing of a nuclear facility, both in the context of the Cold War

In 1983, Klaus Fucks was interviewed, where he gave his own simple moral reckoning, his own reflective evaluation as to what he had done (Thorndike Greenspan, 2021:353):

“There have been things in my life that I would do differently. Looking back at those 72 years I have lived, I can see all the mistakes I made and those I could have avoided. But I am deeply convinced that, despite all the mistakes and their negligent behaviour, if the line of your life still took you towards the goal you had set once and for all; if you were able to reach that goal, or at least get closer to it, if going in that direction you did not lose yourself, nor squander your strength, committed anything contemptible, humiliated yourself, climbed over dead bodies, not harmed others to get there, if you were able to maintain the moral course within your soul which in every language is called conscience, you can consider your life is a success.”

Renfrew Christie comments, in relation to the bombing of a nuclear facility in the context of the Cold War, that, on 9 June 1981, eighteen months before Rodney (Wilkinson) went in and bombed Koeberg, the Israelis bombed a Soviet built nuclear reactor in Iraq; Saddam Husain’s atomic reactor, Osirak. That was a staggering occurrence worldwide, because nuclear reactors in general, are off-limits and off-target, and the Israelis did this for their own reasons. I am, however, sure they got American permission. But did the Soviet Union say ‘yes’ to the bombing of Koeberg as a reprisal for the bombing of Osirak? Was that bombing in the minds of the ‘Cold Warriors’? The Cold War was a hot war, of course, quite often. There were proxy wars all over the place, and the anti-apartheid war was a proxy war. But did the decision to bomb Koeberg on the part of the ANC get permission from the Soviet Union? I am prepared to bet it did.¹ (The Thinker, 2024:111).

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¹ Excerpts from a conversation with Renfrew Christie and Rodney Wilkinson (The Thinker, 2024:111).