

Declassified grand jury transcripts confirm frame-up of Ethel Rosenberg

The trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg

By Tom Eley
13 September 2008

The recent release of previously secret grand jury transcripts has revealed that crucial testimony was perjured in the conviction and 1953 execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for conspiracy to commit espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union.

The Rosenbergs were accused of planning to provide the Soviet Union with intelligence that would assist in the development of its atomic bomb project. They were tried and convicted in 1951, and executed in 1953 at the height of the post-World War II Red Scare, orphaning two young children. The execution was a savage act by the US government calculated to terrorize the population.

The transcripts, which had been sealed for 55 years, became available through the National Archives and Records Administration after a lawsuit by historians and an independent archive. A New York court ordered that the testimony of all but four of 45 grand jury witnesses be released. This included both the testimony of Ethel Rosenberg herself and that of Ruth Greenglass, the wife of David Greenglass, Ethel's brother.

It is the testimony of Ruth Greenglass that strongly suggests that at least Ethel Rosenberg was convicted based on perjured testimony.

During the Rosenberg trial, Ruth Greenglass claimed that Ethel Rosenberg typed up secrets stolen by David Greenglass, who was a machinist at Los Alamos in New Mexico, the center of the US atomic bomb project. The Greenglasses claimed that Ethel then passed the typed sheets via Julius Rosenberg to Soviet intelligence. The assertion was instrumental in the conviction and execution of Ethel.

The newly released grand jury testimony completely contradicts the version of events Ruth Greenglass presented at the subsequent trial. After stating to the grand jury that she had assisted Julius Rosenberg with espionage, prosecutors asked Greenglass, "Didn't you write [the atomic bomb information] down on a piece of paper?" "Yes," she answered, "I wrote [the atomic bomb information] down on a piece of paper and [Julius Rosenberg] took it with him."

This grand jury testimony confirmed the account given by former Soviet intelligence officials, who said that the information they received was written in longhand.

According to the anticommunist historian Ronald Radosh, "The grand jury documents cast significant doubt on the key prosecution charge used to convict Ethel Rosenberg at the trial and sentence her to death."

In 2001, David Greenglass, who spent 10 years in prison for espionage, disavowed his own testimony. He said the government blackmailed him by threatening to execute his wife. Ruth Greenglass was never tried, and died this past April at the age of 84.

Historical context

There is little doubt that Julius Rosenberg conveyed intelligence to the Soviet Union. It is likely that Ethel Rosenberg was aware of this, but did

not participate actively. Both were members of the Stalinist Communist Party USA (CPUSA).

The charges of atomic espionage against the Rosenbergs, however, were sensationalized. There is no evidence to suggest that information gathered by Rosenberg through Greenglass at Los Alamos played any role in the successful completion of the Russian atomic bomb. According to Morton Sobell, who was convicted along with the Rosenbergs and who recently confessed to carrying on espionage for the Soviet Union, the intelligence that Julius gathered "was junk." Alexander Feklisov, the Soviet agent who was Rosenberg's contact, said that Julius "didn't understand anything about the atomic bomb and he couldn't help us."

The Rosenbergs were victims of a sharp ideological shift on the part of the US ruling elite that was initiated in the late 1940s. This turn is associated with red-baiters such as Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy, who carried out intensely publicized hearings about supposed communist infiltration of the government in the early 1950s. It was shaped as well, however, by the transformation of US liberalism, acting through the Democratic Party.

From 1935, when Joseph Stalin adopted the "Popular Front" in response to the catastrophe of the Nazi seizure of power in Germany—a defeat that had resulted from the Comintern's own counterrevolutionary and short-sighted calculations—the CPUSA supported the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Democratic Party. This uncritical support became especially enthusiastic after Germany repudiated Stalin's disastrous Nazi-Soviet Pact and invaded the Soviet Union.

Julius Rosenberg began providing information to the Soviets in this WWII context, when the US and the Soviet Union were officially allied in war against Nazi Germany. The US, beginning after the Nazi invasion, extended significant material support to the Soviet Union through the Lend Lease Act, which made available US tanks, planes and munitions to the Soviet Union as it suffered the brunt of the Wehrmacht's military might.

Even during the war, there were sharp divisions within the ruling elite over policy toward the Soviet Union. A section favored extending the Soviet Union little or no assistance in its life-and-death struggle with Nazi Germany (Harry Truman, then a US senator, said in 1941, "If we see that Germany is winning we ought to help Russia, and if we see Russia is winning, we ought to help Germany, and that way let them kill as many as possible.") Another element favored opening up a western front in Europe as soon as possible in order to join forces with the Red Army in crushing Nazi Germany.

The Roosevelt administration charted a middle course, providing the Soviets with extensive material assistance, but rejecting Stalin's desperate pleas for the western front as long as possible, while attempting to prevent the Soviets from gaining access to advanced military

technology—including the developing Manhattan project at Los Alamos. Yet, given the context of the US-Soviet alliance, the small-scale espionage attributed to Rosenberg, which primarily related to radar technology, hardly constituted a major threat and may, in fact, have been tolerated.

In their military calculations the Roosevelt administration and the dominant sections of the ruling elite were already looking forward to the postwar period and an anticipated assertion of American hegemony, in which the Soviet Union would be the central rival.

Stalin did not see as far. The Moscow bureaucracy fervently hoped that “peaceful coexistence” and cooperation would continue. The effort to acquire atomic weapons was aimed primarily at providing bargaining room with the US in such an environment.

The Red Scare

Because of this outlook, faithfully parroted by the American Stalinists, the CPUSA had ill prepared its members and sympathizers for the coming postwar reaction.

The shift toward an anti-Soviet posture was anticipated by Truman’s replacement of Henry Wallace in the number-two spot on the Democratic Party ticket in 1944. Wallace, who had been become Roosevelt’s vice president in 1941, favored a conciliatory approach toward the Soviet Union. It was also announced by the atomic incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August of 1945, which Truman calculated would place the Soviet Union in a weak position in ongoing negotiations about the postwar order.

US imperialism took shape as the most powerful counterrevolutionary force in the world in the immediate aftermath of the world war, emboldened by the demise of the old European colonial empires—British, French, Dutch and Belgian—but challenged by third world liberation movements that were invariably dubbed “communist.”

By 1949, however, hopes for unrivaled hegemony took a series of blows. That year, the US-backed nationalist regime in China fell before the peasant armies of Mao Zedong, and the Soviet Union successfully detonated an atomic bomb. A year later, North Korea invaded South Korea. It was in this immediate context that the Truman administration accelerated the Cold War—outlined in the infamous “NSC-68” document and “Truman Doctrine” which pledged the US to the defense of “the free world” against “communism”—and launched the Red Scare to suppress any domestic opposition to this program of militarism.

Indeed, the Red Scare was based at least as much on domestic considerations as foreign policy ones. In 1945-46, the US experienced its largest strike wave in the 20th century. Many of these were wildcat strikes in opposition to the official union leaderships, which hoped to carry on the labor-management cooperation that had prevailed during the war. A deeply felt democratic and egalitarian spirit also pervaded the ranks of the massive conscript army. There was a mood in the working class that things could not be allowed to go back to what they had been during the Great Depression. And there was a certain radicalization among layers of intellectuals and in American culture that had emerged in the Great Depression and threatened to resume at a higher level in the war’s aftermath.

The Red Scare was the ruling class’s antidote to all of these threats. It was first and foremost used as a bludgeon against the working class. Militant workers, who had played the vital role in building up the industrial union movement in the 1930s, were purged from the CIO and the AFL. The state terrorized artists and intellectuals through dozens of inquisitorial hearings organized by the House Un-American Activities Committee, in which leading figures of US culture were forced to recant their previous political affiliations and finger their associates, or else face charges of contempt and possible imprisonment.

The Rosenbergs were tried at the very height of this period of hysteria

and state-promoted ignorance. The US has never recovered from the attack on cultural, intellectual and political life that was unleashed under the mantle of the Red Scare.

The trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were working class people, the children of Eastern European Jewish immigrant workers on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Julius earned a degree as an electrical engineer at City College during the Great Depression; Ethel was an aspiring singer and actress who settled down as a secretary. It was Julius’s work on radar equipment in the Army Signal Corps that would give him access to information on military technology that he passed along to Soviet agents.

What the state wanted of Julius Rosenberg—as with the artists of the “Hollywood Ten”—was a confession and a denunciation of communism. Unlike so many members and supporters of the CPUSA, however, Julius Rosenberg was not compliant. The state hoped that by gaining a guilty conviction and a possible death sentence for Ethel Rosenberg, it could force to Julius cooperate.

However, as a testament to their personal courage, the Rosenbergs chose not to buckle, though they knew that it could cost them their lives. “She called our bluff,” recalled William P. Rogers, then deputy attorney general. The released grand jury testimony shows Ethel Rosenberg again and again taking the Fifth Amendment in response to prosecutor’s questions, “on the grounds that this might tend to incriminate me.”

The CPUSA, still taken aback by the sharp rightward shift of the US government, failed to mount a public defense of the Rosenbergs during the trial. After the guilty verdicts, a public defense campaign was supported by prominent international intellectuals and artists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Pablo Picasso and Diego Rivera. But there was never a class defense of the Rosenbergs like those mounted in an earlier period on behalf of Sacco and Vanzetti and Tom Mooney.

Even without the perjured testimony of the Greenglasses, the level of the evidence marshaled against the Rosenbergs was limited. The claims made at the time that he had somehow stolen the “secret of the atomic bomb” and handed it to Moscow were contrived and false. No such secret existed, and the information provided by Rosenberg appears to have played no role in accelerating Soviet atomic weapons development.

Most historians now agree that Ethel was not involved in providing information to the Soviet Union, although she may have been aware of her husband’s activities. The recently released grand jury testimony points in this direction and suggests that the prosecution had determined to gain a conviction against Ethel regardless of the evidence. In any case, the Rosenbergs were charged and convicted of “conspiracy,” a dubious crime that allows the state to exact punishment based on intent.

The latest exposure of the criminal methods used by the US government in the trial and execution of the Rosenbergs holds vital lessons for the working class.

These methods remain the stock and trade of the US government as it prosecutes its “global war on terror.” No doubt, similar documents will eventually surface exposing the same kind of coerced and perjured testimony used to railroad scores of people to jail on trumped-up charges of “terrorist conspiracy.”

Then as now, these actions were meant to terrorize the population and create a climate of fear in which America’s ruling establishment could carry forward its imperialist policies, both domestic and international.

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