

The Essential Lessons of the Rosenberg Case

55 years after the execution of their parents, the sons of Ethel & Julius Rosenberg speak out

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Fifty five years after the execution of their parents as convicted nuclear spies, the sons of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg share their views on that dark period in American history known as the Cold War... a must read.

The couple's sons say those in power manufactured evidence and targeted their parents, making them the focus of the public's Cold War fear and anger.



Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, by Pablo Picasso

We are the sons of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. We were young children — 10 and 6 years old, respectively — when our parents were put to death in the electric chair at Sing Sing for passing the secret of the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union.

For many years after that, we believed our parents to be wholly innocent of the charges against them. But over the years, and especially as further evidence became available at the end of the Cold War, we began to question that belief.

Now, 55 years after their execution, two recent revelations in our parents' case have again

rekindled fierce debate about their culpability. But in our opinion, these disclosures — the release of our aunt’s sworn statements to a grand jury and a surprise new admission by our parents’ codefendant — have obscured both the essence and the essential lessons of the Rosenberg case.

“Many Americans now living were not born when our parents stood trial in 1951 for conspiracy to commit espionage, so they may not understand why this case remains one of our nation’s most sensational courtroom dramas. The reason is that, at the height of the Cold War, two people were executed for allegedly giving the secret of the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union.

Viewed through the lens of 1950s America, it appeared to many that the Rosenbergs had given our archenemy the means to destroy our nation. The trial judge justified the death sentences by pronouncing that our parents made it possible for the Soviets to build their bomb earlier than expected, causing the Korean War and the deaths of thousands of American soldiers. “I consider your crime worse than murder,” said the judge as he sentenced our parents to death. “Plain deliberate contemplated murder is dwarfed in magnitude by comparison with the crime you have committed.”

But was that true? Had they in fact passed the so-called secret of the atomic bomb to the Russians? We have acknowledged for a long time the possibility that our father may have engaged in non-atomic espionage. The recent statement by our parents’ codefendant, Morton Sobell, confirms exactly that, and several weeks ago we stated publicly for the first time that we now believe that our father did, in fact, participate in passing along military information.

But Sobell’s recent admission sheds no light on whether our father in fact stole the secret of the atomic bomb, the crime for which he was executed. To this day, there is no credible evidence that he participated in obtaining or passing on any such secret.

In contrast, the newly released grand jury transcript does provide interesting new information about the case.

At the start of the investigation against our parents, David and Ruth Greenglass, our mother’s brother and sister-in-law, confessed to being part of an atomic spy ring and cooperated with the prosecution in exchange for no charges being brought against Ruth and a comparatively light sentence for David.

Ruth’s trial testimony provided the one key piece of evidence that led to our mother’s conviction and subsequent execution. She testified at trial that our mother typed up notes that contained the “secret” of the atomic bomb, provided, supposedly, by David, a U.S. Army sergeant with only a high school education, who was assigned as a machinist to the Manhattan Project at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico.

However, the newly released transcript reveals that Ruth Greenglass’ grand jury testimony included nothing about our mother typing any espionage notes. The only notes mentioned in Ruth’s testimony were ones she wrote herself, which described the buildings at Los Alamos, not the atomic bomb.

It was not until February 1951, months after her grand jury testimony, that Ruth gave a new statement in which she reported (we would say “invented”), for the first time, the allegation

that our mother had typed David's handwritten notes describing the atomic bomb. Confronted with Ruth's revisions, David Greenglass then contradicted his earlier statement to the FBI in which he had denied our mother's participation in espionage activities. Subsequently, David and Ruth both testified at the trial that our mother had typed notes about the secret of the atomic bomb.

In another stunning discrepancy, there is no mention in Ruth's grand jury testimony of an alleged meeting described by David and Ruth at the trial, during which David supposedly handed over the "secret of the atom bomb sketch" — trial Exhibit 8 — to Julius. Exhibit 8 was the main evidence for the government's contention that Julius successfully stole such a secret. If there is no mention of the meeting in David's grand jury testimony (which has yet to be released but which is essential to obtain), the core of the government's case against both of our parents will be dealt a crippling blow.

Some commentators have, in essence, said that neither this lack of evidence nor these inconsistencies matter. "The Rosenbergs were Soviet spies, and not minor ones either," wrote Ronald Radosh in these pages on Sept. 17.

Evidently, in Radosh's eyes, our mother remains a spy even though the new information indicates that the evidence against her was fabricated, and our father succeeded in passing vitally important data even though there is no clear proof to this day of the value of the military/industrial information that he, Sobell or others transmitted.

Radosh's arguments also divert attention from the most important problem of all: The U.S. government executed two people for stealing the secret of the atomic bomb — a crime it knew they did not commit.

The central lesson of this episode is that our government abused its power in dangerous ways that remain relevant today. Those in power targeted our parents, making them the focus of the public's Cold War-era fear and anger. They manufactured testimony and evidence. They arrested our mother simply as leverage to get our father to cooperate.

They used the ultimate weapon — the threat of death — to try to extort a confession. They created the myth that there was a key "secret" of the atomic bomb, and then devised a strategy to make it appear that our father had sought and passed on that "secret." They executed our father when he refused to collaborate in this lie. They executed our mother as well, even though they knew that she was not an active participant in any espionage activities.

This case provides a crucial warning about the tendencies of our government to manufacture and exploit public fear, to trample civil rights and to manipulate judicial proceedings. In our current political climate, the targets being vilified have changed, but the tactics of those in power remain much the same.

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