

The Rosenberg Case: A Summary

Julius Rosenberg was arrested in July 1950 a few weeks after the Korean War began. He was executed, along with his wife, Ethel, on June 19, 1953, a few weeks before it ended. The charge against the Rosenbergs was vague - "Conspiracy to Commit Espionage." But they really were tried and sentenced for giving the secret of the atomic bomb to the USSR. Their co-defendant Morton Sobell also was convicted and received a 30-year prison sentence.

The Rosenbergs were tried and found guilty in March 1951. Federal Judge Irving R. Kaufman pronounced the death sentence in early April. The Rosenbergs' attorneys worked for over two years to have the verdict overturned. They appealed to the Supreme Court nine times, but the Court refused to review the record. Neither President Truman nor President Eisenhower granted their requests for clemency.

Because the charge was conspiracy, their conviction required no tangible evidence that they had stolen anything or given it to anybody. The key government witnesses were all charged with the same conspiracy and received more favorable treatment in return for testifying that the Rosenbergs were guilty. David and Ruth Greenglass, Ethel Rosenberg's brother and sister-in-law, testified that Julius with Ethel's help recruited David into an atomic spy ring in 1944.

At that time David, an Army sergeant, worked as a machinist at Los Alamos in New Mexico where the first Atomic Bomb was being built. The Greenglasses swore that David provided one set of sketches and an accompanying theoretical description of the bomb to Julius Rosenberg in September 1945, and that Ethel was present and typed up David's notes. In return for the Greenglass' cooperation, Ruth Greenglass, who swore she helped steal what the prosecution called "the most important scientific secret ever known to mankind," was never even indicted.

David also testified that he gave another set of sketches to Harry Gold who used the recognition signal "I come from Julius" to identify himself to David when they met. Gold swore he was a spy courier transmitting information from atomic scientist Klaus Fuchs to the Soviet Union, but that on this one occasion he received information from Greenglass. FBI documents first made public in the late 1970's show that Greenglass originally claimed Gold identified himself as "Dave from Pittsburgh" while Gold said he identified himself to Greenglass as "Ben from Brooklyn." One FBI file shows that after several months in prison, but before the trial, prosecutors brought Gold and Greenglass together to iron out this discrepancy. It was at that meeting that they suddenly "remembered" the name "Julius" in the recognition signal.

The Rosenbergs testified and denied all charges. They invoked the Fifth Amendment refusing to answer repeated prosecution questions about their political affiliations. During the McCarthy period, many felt that such a refusal to answer was an admission of Communist Party membership and that all Communists were spies for the Soviet Union.

Judge Kaufman justified the death sentence for conspiracy convictions as follows: "I consider your crimes worse than murder.... I believe your conduct in putting into the hands of the Russians the A-bomb years before our best scientists predicted Russia would perfect the bomb has already caused, in my opinion, the Communist aggression in Korea, with the resultant casualties exceeding fifty thousand and who knows how many millions more of innocent people may pay the price of your treason." He concluded their, "[l]ove for their cause dominated their lives – it was even greater than their love for their children."

Despite Kaufman's claim a chorus of scientists including Harold Urey and J. Robert Oppenheimer stated that there was no "secret" of the Atomic Bomb. Years later, many Atomic scientists agreed with a colleague's assessment that the Greenglass material was, "too incomplete, ambiguous and even incorrect to be of any service or value to the Russians in shortening the time required to develop their nuclear bombs."

The release by the CIA of the "VENONA" transcriptions in 1995, caused the mass media to renew prior conclusions that the Rosenbergs were guilty. The transcriptions, however, do not point to the Rosenbergs' involvement in atomic espionage. Julius is never mentioned by name, and the spy code-named "Antenna" and later "Liberal," whom the government claims was Julius Rosenberg, was engaged in military/industrial rather than atomic espionage. Even more remarkably, the key reference to Antenna/Liberal's wife states that she was not an espionage agent.

In 2008 the transcripts of the testimony of 43 of the 46 witnesses who appeared before the Grand Jury that indicted the Rosenbergs were released to the public. This included the testimony of Ruth Greenglass who is deceased, but not David Greenglass who is still alive. Ruth Greenglass's testimony did not mention the September 1945 meeting described above, the atomic bomb sketch, any hand-written notes, Ethel Rosenberg's typing, or Ethel's presence at the meeting.

On the same day in 2008, Morton Sobell acknowledged for the first time that he, along with Julius Rosenberg, passed non-atomic, military-industrial information to the USSR. He said the primary purpose of this work was to help the USSR defeat the Nazis during World War II.

In October 2010, the publication of the meticulously researched by book, [*Final Verdict*](#), revealed the following:

When Julius Rosenberg was fired from the Army Corp of Engineers in January 1945, the USSR, fearing that the U.S. had discovered that Julius Rosenberg was an espionage agent, removed him from all espionage activity. Therefore, the supposed September 1945 espionage meeting described above between the Rosenbergs and Greenglass could not have taken place. Instead, Ruth Greenglass, **ON HER OWN**, without the Rosenberg's involvement, met with Soviet agents three months later and delivered the sketch the government called "the secret of the atomic bomb."

This new information supports this summary of the case: Julius Rosenberg engaged in non-atomic espionage during the 1940's. The Greenglasses delivered atomic information of relatively little value to the Soviet Union without the Rosenbergs' direct assistance. Neither Julius nor Ethel Rosenberg was a member of an atomic spy ring that stole the secret of the Atomic Bomb. The United States government knew all along that Ethel Rosenberg was not an espionage agent, and that Julius was not an atomic spy, but executed them both anyway.

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