

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 legal charge of which the Rosenbergs were convicted was vague: “Conspiracy to Commit Espionage.” But in a practical sense they were held accountable for giving the so-called “secret of the atomic bomb” to the USSR.

The Rosenbergs’ trial took place 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 U.S. 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, the Rosenbergs’ conviction required no tangible evidence that they had stolen anything or given it to anybody. The key government witnesses – (Ethel’s brother and sister-in-law, David and Ruth Greenglass) – were charged with the same conspiracy and received more favorable treatment in return for testifying that the Rosenbergs were guilty.

The Greenglasses testified that Julius, with Ethel’s help, recruited David into an atomic spy ring in 1944 while David worked as a machinist at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, where the first atomic was being built. On the stand in the Rosenbergs’ trial, the Greenglasses swore that David provided a sketch 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 their cooperation, David received a sentence of 15 years in prison and served 10 before being released; and Ruth Greenglass, who testified that she helped steal what the prosecution called “the most important scientific secret ever known to mankind,” was never even indicted.

During the trial, David Greenglass 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 first met. Gold testified that 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 David Greenglass originally claimed Gold identified himself as “Dave from Pittsburgh,” while Gold first 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 Gold and Greenglass suddenly “remembered” the name “Julius” in the recognition signal.

The Rosenbergs testified in their own defense at their trial and denied all charges. They invoked their Fifth Amendment rights and refused 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.

Following the three week trial, both Rosenbergs were convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage, as was their co-defendant Morton Sobell. Sobell received a 30-year sentence while the Rosenbergs were given the death penalty. Judge Kaufman justified the death sentence 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 that the Rosenbergs’ “[l]ove for their cause dominated their lives – it was even greater than their love for their children.”

Despite Kaufman’s assertion about the supposed value of the information the Rosenbergs allegedly passed to the Soviets, a chorus of leading 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.”

Decades later, the 1995 release by the CIA of the “VENONA” transcriptions of KGB files, caused the mainstream media to renew prior conclusions that the Rosenbergs were guilty. The transcriptions, however, do not point to the Rosenbergs’ involvement in atomic espionage. The name “Julius Rosenberg” is never mentioned. According to these documents, the spy code-named “Antenna” and later “Liberal,” whom the U.S. Government claims was Julius Rosenberg, was engaged in military/industrial rather than atomic espionage. One transmission reports that this code-named spy was “ignorant” of the atomic bomb project. Even more remarkably, the key reference to Antenna/Liberal’s wife states that she was not an espionage agent.

Another significant development in the Rosenberg Case came in 2008, when 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 material included the testimony of Ruth Greenglass, who was deceased at that point, but not that of David Greenglass, who was still alive. David’s testimony was not released until 2015, following his death.

At the time of the first release of grand jury material in 2008, Morton Sobell, then in his 90’s, acknowledged publicly 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.

Despite this fact, these transcripts reveal startling contradictions between Ruth and David Greenglass’ sworn testimony before the grand jury and at trial. Before the grand jury, neither Greenglass mentioned:

- the allegedly crucial September 1945 meeting
- the supposed atomic bomb sketch that they later said David gave to Julius at that meeting
- any hand-written notes from David, about the sketch or bomb
- Ethel Rosenberg doing any typing of these supposed notes
- or Ethel’s presence at the alleged meeting.

These contradictions between the Greenglasses’ sworn testimony at trial and before the grand jury, coupled with FBI files indicating that Ethel was only arrested to use as a “lever” to coerce Julius into “disgorging” information, has led to growing calls for Ethel’s exoneration.

The book *Final Verdict*, published in 2010, gave further weight to the argument that Ethel Rosenberg was wrongfully convicted and that Julius’ espionage in the 1940’s for the USSR, did not include any transmission of atomic information. The authors’ meticulous research, in fact reveals even more information that corroborates the claim that evidence against Ethel was fabricated.

The book details the finding that when Julius Rosenberg was fired from the Army Corp of Engineers in January 1945, the USSR suspended him from all ongoing activities because they feared that the U.S. had discovered Julius was spying. The KGB files indicate Julius engaged in no further espionage activities in 1945. Thus, the supposed espionage meeting between the Rosenbergs and David Greenglass, which the Greenglasses testified took place in September 1945, would not have occurred.

Instead, *Final Verdict* concludes (with supporting evidence from KGB files) that Ruth Greenglass, **on her own**, without the Rosenbergs' involvement, met with a Soviet agent on December 21, 1945 and delivered the sketch the government called "the secret of the atomic bomb." That sketch was logged into the main KGB file center in Russia on December 27th, 1945.

This information is consistent with the failure of either Greenglass to mention the September 1945 meeting in their grand jury testimony. It supports this summary of the case:

- Julius Rosenberg engaged in non-atomic espionage for the Soviet Union during the 1940's.
- At least nine months after the Soviets suspended their relationship with Julius, the Greenglasses delivered atomic information of relatively little value to the Soviet Union without the Rosenbergs' assistance.
- Neither 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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