

Resource Sheet #02

Student Background Materials

Cold War Case Files: The Rosenbergs

Was Justice Fairly Served?

Who were the Rosenbergs?

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg seemed to be a perfectly ordinary couple. They lived in New York City where they were raising two young sons, Michael and Robert.



Rosenberg, Julius; Rosenberg, Ethel. Photograph. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Web. 19 Feb. 2014

Although they both grew up in the same neighborhood on Manhattan's predominantly Jewish Lower East Side in the 1930s, Julius and Ethel did not meet until Julius was a student at City College of New York. Ethel had been an excellent student in high school and graduated early at the age of fifteen. She enjoyed singing and acting but never aspired to attend college. At a New Year's Eve dance where she was singing, Ethel met the only love of her life. She married Julius in the summer of 1939 right after he graduated from college with a degree in electrical engineering.

The couple had a common interest in politics. In college, Julius met many new friends who were interested in left-wing political ideas. This was the time of the Great Depression and many Americans were out of work and living in poverty. Julius came to believe that under a communist system, there would never be such misery and instability. Everyone would be employed and share in the nation's resources equally.

Ethel also came to believe in communism. At her job as a shipping clerk, she became upset with the working conditions and led 150 of her co-workers in a strike against their managers. Ethel was fired for her union activities, but her experience left her convinced that a communist system of government in the United States would benefit all workers.

For a few years before their sons were born, Julius and Ethel were active members of the Communist Party. On occasions, they hosted party meetings in their apartment. Ethel's younger brother, David Greenglass, and his wife, Ruth, also joined the political movement.

At the time, during the Second World War, the United States was allied with the Soviet Union and Great Britain in fighting against the fascist regimes of Germany and Japan. Many communists in the United States supported the fight against fascism, particularly Nazi Germany, which was committing horrific acts against Europe's Jews. When David went into the army in 1943, he was proud to serve his country, but he also felt pride in furthering the communist cause by supporting the Soviet Union and recruiting his fellow soldiers into the Communist Party.

Julius was exempt from the army. Instead, he had an important civilian job as an engineering inspector of electrical equipment for the U.S. Army Signal Corps. Before the war ended, in the spring of 1945, Julius was fired when it was discovered he had concealed his previous membership in the Communist Party.

Soviet Spies and the Atomic Bomb

During the war, the United States was racing to develop the atomic bomb, a nuclear weapon more powerful and destructive than any other weapon in the world. The top-secret government project to build the atomic bomb was code-named the Manhattan Project. As a soldier, David Greenglass was assigned to Los Alamos, New Mexico, where the Manhattan Project's lab facility was based. He worked as a machinist and later became foreman in the high explosives unit that produced the bomb's detonation device. In the summer of 1945, the first bomb was assembled at Los Alamos and was ready to be tested. The mushroom-shaped cloud from the blast rose 40,000 feet over the New Mexico desert and spread dangerous radioactive material into the air. Three weeks later, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima (August 6, 1945) and Nagasaki (August 9, 1945), thus ending the war.

It had become clear even before the end of the war that the United States and the Soviet Union would not maintain their alliance into peacetime. Stark differences in ideology and competing world interests drove them apart. Indeed, there is evidence that President Harry Truman believed that one of the side-benefits of dropping the atomic bombs on Japan would be to impress the Soviets with the power of this immense new weapon, thereby persuading them to be more respectful of American interests. Not surprisingly, the Soviet Union was eager to build its own atomic weapon. In the summer of 1949, the Soviets achieved this goal. They thus set off a new "Cold War" between the two world superpowers that focused particularly on the nuclear arms race that would overshadow the entire world for the next four decades. Worried Americans began building bomb shelters in their backyards and preparing for the coming nuclear holocaust.

The rapid Soviet development of the atomic bomb prompted not only great fears, but also great suspicions. Did Soviet scientists develop the technology to build their own atomic bomb or were they assisted by spies in the United States? Around the same time the Soviets were testing their first atomic bomb, agents from the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) had discovered and decoded a report regarding the progress of the Manhattan Project. It was written in 1944 by Klaus Fuchs, a British atomic scientist. The report was found in the office of a Soviet official in New York. Did the Soviets steal the report or was Klaus Fuchs a Soviet spy?

When questioned, Klaus admitted to giving information to the Soviets while working on the Manhattan Project in the United States. He told about a man called "Raymond" to whom he passed the secret documents. A few months later, the FBI identified Harry Gold, a chemist working in New York, as the man known to Klaus as "Raymond." Harry confessed as well. He also told the FBI that he took information from a soldier at Los Alamos and delivered it to Anatoli Yakovlev, the Soviet's head of spy operations working in New York City. Harry didn't know the name of the soldier at Los Alamos, but he recalled that the soldier's wife was named Ruth.

The FBI figured out the identity of the soldier Harry described and David Greenglass was brought into custody. Was he part of this spy ring? Like Klaus and Harry, David was ready to talk. In exchange for his testimony, the U.S. Government promised not to prosecute his wife, Ruth, so that she could care for their young children. David confessed to giving information about the atomic bomb to Harry Gold. Then, David implicated his brother-in-law, Julius. David told the FBI that Julius had recruited him to become a spy and had given him the instructions concerning his meeting with Harry Gold in New Mexico.

Julius was questioned a few days later. He called David a liar and denied working for the Soviets as a spy. The FBI released Julius and continued to gather evidence about the spy ring. On July 17, 1950, agents returned to the Rosenberg apartment. This time, they came with an arrest warrant. Julius was taken away in handcuffs, leaving behind his wife, Ethel, and their two boys. He never returned.

In August, Julius was indicted for conspiracy (planning with others to act illegally) to commit espionage (spying). This meant that a federal grand jury decided there was enough evidence for Julius to be formally charged with a crime. He would stand trial in a federal court. His alleged crime was a capital offense, meaning that if he were to be convicted, Julius might face death as a punishment. However, Julius would not be tried alone. The FBI also arrested Ethel Rosenberg and Morton Sobell. Morton was a friend to Julius in college. The FBI suspected he was also a part of the spy ring. All three would be tried together as co-conspirators under the provisions of the Espionage Act of 1917. The trial was set for March 1951.

In this Cold War Case File investigation, you will learn more about the Rosenbergs' story by examining some of the trial evidence and information not released until decades after the trial.

The Rosenberg case remains one of the most controversial in U.S. history. Your role is to determine if justice was fairly served.

List four questions you want to answer during the course of your investigation. As you gather facts, you may revisit your list in order to revise or add additional questions.

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Glossary

Important Terms

Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) – agency responsible for nuclear power and nuclear weapons beginning January 1, 1947 when the Manhattan Project formally ended; created by the Atomic Energy Act of 1946

Capital crime – a crime that can be punishable by death

Clemency – forgiveness; cancellation of punishment in part or in whole

Conspiracy – crime in which there is an agreement among two or more people to engage in illegal activity. At the trial, the Rosenbergs and Morton Sobell were charged with conspiracy to commit espionage, not espionage itself

Espionage – transmitting information relating to the national defense to the advantage of a foreign nation, spying

Espionage Act of 1917 – first enacted during World War I; prohibited interference with military operations and recruitment; prohibited support to U.S. enemies during wartime; the law has been amended many times (ex. Sedition Act of 1918, Internal Security Act of 1950)

Facsimile – a copy or reproduction

House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) – House of Representatives investigative committee; operated from 1947 to 1975, focus was anti-communist

Indictment – formal accusation from a grand jury who decide whether there is enough evidence to warrant a trial; required for a capital case

Internal Security Act of 1950 (Subversive Activities Control Act or McCarran Act) – required Communist organizations to register with the U.S. Attorney General; created board to investigate subversive activities; gave the government the power to detain, deport, and revoke the citizenship of suspected subversives

KGB – Soviet secret police

Manhattan Project – top-secret U.S. government project to build the atomic bomb

Los Alamos – Manhattan Project lab in New Mexico; David Greenglass was stationed there

Recognition Signal -- secret words or objects used by spies to identify each other

Treason – a criminal offense involving the attempt, by overt acts, to overthrow the government to which the offender owes allegiance or to betray the state to a foreign power

Venona Project– CIA-National Security Agency decoding of secret Soviet reports; began in 1943 and lasted several decades; partial translations released in 1995; did not provide any new ground-breaking evidence relating to the Rosenberg case

Important People

Fuchs, Klaus – British atomic scientist who confessed to passing atomic bomb secrets from the Manhattan Project to the Soviets, indirectly led FBI to Julius Rosenberg

Gold, Harry (“Raymond”) – Swiss-born chemist who confessed to receiving atomic secrets from both Klaus Fuchs and David Greenglass; testified for the prosecution at trial

Greenglass, David – Ethel Rosenberg’s younger brother; key witness for the prosecution

Greenglass, Ruth – wife of David Greenglass; not charged with a crime; testified for the prosecution at trial

Groves, Leslie – director of the Manhattan Project; revealed in a closed meeting of the Atomic Energy Commission in 1954 that the secrets passed to the Soviets about the atomic bomb did not help the Soviets build the atomic bomb and were actually of little value

Hiss, Alger – high-ranking government official accused of being a Soviet spy; convicted of perjury in 1950 and sentenced to five years; high-profile Cold War case one year before the Rosenberg trial

Kaufman, Irvin R. – federal judge for the Rosenberg-Sobell trial

McCarthy, Joseph – senator who led a crusade to oust communists from the U.S. government; held hearings accusing State Department officials in 1950 setting off a wave of anti-communist hysteria; was censured by the Senate in 1954 after hearings accusing Army officials of communist loyalties

Oppenheimer, Robert – lead atomic scientist on the Manhattan Project; security clearance revoked by AEC in 1954 due to his previous Communist sympathies and alleged connection to communist scientists at Los Alamos

Raymond – See Harry Gold

Rosenberg, Ethel – wife of Julius Rosenberg

Rosenberg, Julius – husband of Ethel Rosenberg

Sobell, Morton – friend of Julius Rosenberg

Yatskov (Yakovlev), Anatoli A. – head of Russian UN delegation and the KGB’s chief of U.S. spy operations working in New York City, Julius’ Soviet contact