

50 years since the execution of the Rosenbergs

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19 June 2003

June 19 marks the 50th anniversary of the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg on charges of conspiracy to commit espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union.

Many of the Rosenbergs' contemporaries, for whom their persecution and state murder was the most searing episode in one of the darkest chapters in US history, have passed from the scene. Yet still today, for millions of people around the world, the name of the young couple evokes the Cold War, the McCarthyite witch-hunt in the United States and all of the crimes associated with Washington's global crusade against communism. The execution of the father and mother of two young children, residents of New York City's Lower East Side—he 35 years old and she 37 at the time of their deaths—is testimony to the savagery of which the American ruling establishment is capable when it perceives its vital interests to be at stake.

Despite the passing of five decades, the issues surrounding the Rosenberg case are in many ways posed more sharply today than at any time since the execution itself. Once again, a US administration is seeking to terrorize the entire population as a means of suppressing dissent and exercising control on behalf of a wealthy elite. Under the guise of a global “war on terrorism,” it has rammed through the USA Patriot Act—modeled in part on the anti-communist McCarran Internal Security Act of 50 years ago—assuming vast unconstitutional powers to arrest without charges, detain without trial and conduct unrestricted police surveillance.

Today, as then, the government's fear-mongering and attacks on democratic rights are aimed at suppressing widespread opposition to American military aggression abroad.

The arrests of the Rosenbergs in 1950, their trial and conviction in 1951, and their executions in 1953 represented the high point of a nationwide campaign of anti-communist witch-hunting and hysteria. During the five years preceding the execution of the Rosenbergs, the House Un-American Activities Committee held 84 hearings into “communist subversion.” Those who refused to cooperate by “naming names”—including the group known as the Hollywood 10—were cited for contempt of Congress and imprisoned. Millions of workers were forced to take loyalty oaths, and some 15,000 federal employees were fired or forced to resign by loyalty boards created by the Truman administration.

In key industries, red scares, aided and abetted by both the AFL and CIO trade union bureaucracies, forced many of the most militant workers out of the factories and ensured the political subordination of the American labor movement to the capitalist state and its two-party system, setting into motion the decay of the labor movement and its present-day transformation into an appendage of corporate power. Blacklists were created, not only against Hollywood actors, directors and others in the filmmaking industry, but against workers as well.

The McCarthyite witch-hunt at home went hand in hand with the turn to a foreign policy of global counterrevolution, in which Washington sought to suppress the wave of revolutionary struggles that followed the Second World War, in the name of combating “Soviet aggression” and “communist subversion.”

The Soviet Union's detonation of its first atom bomb in August, 1949 and the triumph of the Chinese Revolution that same year threw the

foreign policy developed by the American ruling class into crisis and sparked the search for scapegoats—those who could be blamed for the “loss” of China and the military strength of the USSR.

With the Rosenberg prosecution, the government aimed to send an unmistakable message. As Julius himself put it not long before he was killed: “This death sentence is not surprising. It had to be. There had to be a Rosenberg case, because there had to be an intensification of the hysteria in America to make the Korean War acceptable to the American people. There had to be hysteria and a fear sent through America in order to get increased war budgets. And there had to be a dagger thrust in the heart of the left to tell them that you are no longer gonna get five years for a Smith Act prosecution or one year for contempt of court, but we're gonna kill ya!”

The government set out to prove the Rosenbergs guilty of what J. Edgar Hoover described as the “crime of the century”—stealing the “secret of the atomic bomb” and giving it to Moscow.

Information has surfaced in recent years suggesting that Julius Rosenberg was involved in passing some form of intelligence to Soviet officials during the Second World War. According to the Soviet intelligence agent who claimed to have dealt with Rosenberg during the war years, this information pertained not to the bomb, but rather to electronics. In any case, the idea that he divulged the “secret of the atomic bomb” is preposterous on its face.

Scientifically speaking, there was no such secret. The Soviets already had a program to develop atomic weapons, and it was understood within the US government and among American scientists that it was only a matter of time before they achieved their goal. Relaying any useful information on the Manhattan Project would have required the transfer of scores of volumes of scientific material, something that never happened and, indeed, was beyond the ability of the Rosenbergs or anyone else charged in connection with the alleged spy ring.

It should be noted that at the time of the alleged conspiracy, the Soviet Union was a wartime ally of the United States, not its enemy. Aiding the Soviet Union, which was carrying out a life-and-death struggle against Nazi aggression, was hardly seen as a crime by most Americans, and many suspected that the Western powers were content to see the Soviet people bled by the Nazis.

Within the Roosevelt administration and among the scientists most directly involved in the American effort to develop an atomic bomb, there were many who expressed the opinion that information on the weapon should have been shared with the Soviets, and that any weapons developed by the US should have been placed under the control of an international commission with Soviet participation. There was grave concern that attempts to conceal information about the bomb would only exacerbate tensions with Moscow and lead inevitably to an atomic arms race.

Soon after the end of the Second World War, however, the Cold War and arms race began in earnest, followed soon enough by the hunt for spies. By January, 1950, former State Department official Alger Hiss, although never charged with spying, was convicted of perjury in connection with espionage accusations. Two weeks later the British

physicist Klaus Fuchs was arrested in the UK on charges of disclosing information about US research on nuclear weapons to the Soviet Union.

During the very same week, Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy became a national political figure with his highly publicized charges of Communist infiltration of the State Department and other government agencies. The Communist Party was outlawed and its leaders sent to prison under the thought-control Smith Act—later declared unconstitutional—which banned the “advocacy” of the forcible overthrow of the government. Only two weeks before the arrest of Julius Rosenberg, the Korean War broke out.

The arrest of Fuchs was followed by an intensified investigation that led to American scientists and technicians. Within a few months, the trail led to Julius Rosenberg.

The political character of the frame-up of the Rosenbergs becomes clear when one contrasts their execution to the sentences handed down in Britain to figures who were in a position to provide the Soviets with real information on the atomic bomb and pleaded guilty to doing so. Fuchs, the German-born British scientist who confessed to giving information on the bomb to the Soviets, served nine years in prison following his conviction. Alan Nunn May, a British physicist who pleaded guilty to espionage, including passing enriched uranium to his Soviet handler, served six years.

How did the Rosenbergs become the targets for a vindictive legal lynching? To understand their fate one must review the political beliefs that inspired their activities.

Their life experience was similar to that of thousands of other immigrants or first-generation Americans, especially in New York’s Jewish immigrant community during in the Great Depression. Radicalized by poverty, inequality, and the threat of fascism, and inspired by the Russian Revolution, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg joined the Young Communist League as teenagers.

During the period in which they became politically active, however, the Communist Party of the USA adopted the popular front line developed by the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow. The party engaged in uncritical adulation of Roosevelt and the New Deal, while gaining substantial influence both within the unions and the political life of the country as a whole. Once the US joined the war, this popular front line reached a high point, with the CPUSA describing communism as “20th century Americanism” and enforcing no-strike pledges and speedups wherever it had control in the unions. The party attracted support on the basis of “friendship for the Soviet Union,” rather than the fight for socialism.

At the same time, the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow took the adventurous and politically irresponsible decision to use members of Communist Parties around the world, including the CPUSA, for espionage, exposing them to the anti-communist charge that CP supporters were agents of a foreign power.

While there is no doubting the Rosenbergs’ heroism in refusing to bow to the pressure of the witch-hunters, there is also no question that the politics of the CPUSA and Stalinism left them woefully unprepared for the political transformation that took place with the onset of the Cold War, and undermined their ability to wage an effective defense.

At the trial itself, their defense team, which was close to the CP, proved itself incapable of answering the charges politically, in what was clearly a political show trial. The government’s aim was to whip up a frenzy of nationalism and anti-communism, in which membership in the Communist Party, or even support for socialist ideas, could be equated with spying for the USSR. On the advice of their lawyers, the Rosenbergs pleaded the Fifth Amendment when asked about their membership in the CP, a tactic that, under these circumstances, only played into the hands of the prosecution and its conspiracy charges.

Initially, the CP’s newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, shied away from the case, hoping that it would blow over. “We didn’t want to be associated in

any way, shape or form with espionage,” the paper’s then-editor, John Gates, told an interviewer in 1991. “In the public mind, the words ‘spy’ and ‘communist’ were synonymous. We were very leery.”

A two-year campaign to save the lives of the Rosenbergs followed the convictions. Millions were drawn into the worldwide petitions, demonstrations and protests. The case wound its way through the appeals process, from the US Court of Appeals to, ultimately, the US Supreme Court.

The Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit ruled against the defendants in February 1952. In October of that year the Supreme Court announced that it would not hear the case.

Four justices of the Supreme Court were prepared to grant a stay of execution at the last moment, but five were required for a majority. A special session of the Court was called on June 19, 1953 to vacate a stay granted by Justice William O. Douglas. The Rosenbergs were executed that night in New York’s Sing Sing Prison.

The evidence at trial as well as subsequent revelations by key figures involved in the case have exposed the prosecution as a crude political frame-up. The bias of Judge Irving R. Kaufman, who presided over the trial, was so blatant as to arouse the anger of Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter. It has been revealed since that Kaufman engaged in grossly illegal actions, including discussing the case improperly with members of the prosecution before the trial and promising the government a death penalty upon conviction.

Ethel Rosenberg, it is now almost universally acknowledged, had no connection whatsoever with espionage. Her brother, who provided the key evidence against her at trial, has since admitted that he made up the story of her involvement as part of a deal with the prosecutors to save his own neck and avoid the prosecution of his wife.

The authorities knew that the young mother of two was guilty of nothing, but decided to use her as a hostage, hoping that the threat to kill her would break her husband. In the end, she was put to death for refusing to renounce her husband and for her husband’s refusal to grovel before the government.

Witnesses to the execution described both Julius and Ethel as remarkably composed as they went to their deaths in the electric chair. Ethel, placed in the chair just after her husband’s lifeless body was removed, kissed the prison matron on the cheek. The executioner had to throw the switch of electric current five times because the leather cap containing the electrodes was too large for her head.

In justifying this barbaric state killing, Judge Kaufman delivered a reactionary diatribe at the end of the trial. He called the Rosenbergs’ supposed crime “worse than murder.” He declared: “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 50,000 and who knows but that millions more of innocent people may pay the price of your treason...We have evidence of your treachery all around us every day—for the civilian defense activities throughout the nation are aimed at preparing us for an atom bomb attack.”

Had the Rosenbergs been guilty as charged—which they were not—a far more plausible argument could be made that their actions might have saved the lives of millions. The USSR’s production of atomic weapons served as a deterrent to the aggressive impulses of American imperialism during the postwar period. Had Moscow not had the bomb, proposals to use nuclear weapons made by rabid militarists like General Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War and General Curtis LeMay during the war in Vietnam might well have been implemented.

While the international policy of the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy was counterrevolutionary, resulting in the defeats of the working class in country after country, the very existence of the Soviet Union and its

possession of nuclear arms served as a decided restraint on American ambitions. The frustration of the American ruling class over its inability to use its military advantage to impose its will on the entire world found its poisonous expression in the political vendetta against the Rosenbergs.

Recent history has seen the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and consequently the fading of the threat of nuclear retaliation as a check on US imperialism's global machinations. The result is the Bush administration's doctrine of preventive war and an eruption of US militarism that threatens to pave the way to another world war.

In the 50 years since they were sent to their deaths, the case of the Rosenbergs has remained a subject of sharp controversy. In the climate produced by the civil rights and antiwar movements, the political killing carried out by the US government moved new generations of workers and youth. In 1971, E. L. Doctorow wrote *The Book of Daniel*, a historical novel based on the Rosenbergs and their children. Doctorow assisted in turning the book into a film, *Daniel* (1983), directed by Sidney Lumet and boasting a cast that included Edward Asner, Lindsay Crouse, Timothy Hutton, Mandy Patinkin, Amanda Plummer and John Rubinstein. Many of the actors worked on the film for minimum salary, and Hutton turned down a million-dollar role in another film in order to star in *Daniel*.

The Rosenberg sons, Michael and Robert Meeropol, have worked tirelessly to explain the importance of their parents' case. They were adopted by Abel and Anne Meeropol in 1957. Abel Meeropol, under the name Lewis Allan, was the composer and lyricist of the famed song "Strange Fruit," a protest against the lynching of African-Americans in the American South.

The Meeropol brothers wrote *We Are Your Sons*, explaining their experiences, in 1975. They have continued to speak out, launching the Rosenberg Fund for Children, dedicated to the assistance of the children of political prisoners. The Rosenberg Fund is holding a commemorative event in New York City on June 19 to mark the 50th anniversary of the execution.

On the other side, a coterie of ex-Stalinists and former radicals have used the case as a vehicle for making their own peace with political reaction. Most prominent among them is Ronald Radosh, co-author of the 1983 book *The Rosenberg File*. Using government files and prosecution arguments, he set out to "prove" the guilt of the Rosenbergs and thereby atone for his own leftist past.

In a 2001 memoir, *Commies*, a book that is actively promoted by the Republican right, Radosh has followed this trajectory to its logical and miserable conclusion, writing, "the Left was wrong not just about the Rosenberg Case, but about most everything else...the entire socialist project was wrong." Political elements such as Radosh specialize in exploiting the crimes of the Soviet bureaucracy—which many of them previously supported—to line up with the right, while defaming those who refuse to join them in groveling before political reaction.

All genuine supporters of democratic rights defend the memory of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, just as they do that of the Haymarket martyrs, who were hung in 1887, and Sacco and Vanzetti, executed in 1927. As far as the socialist movement is concerned, the issue never was whether the defendants sought to aid the USSR. The Rosenberg case remains what it was from the very beginning—a political frame-up whose victims were sacrificed to further the interests of a ruling elite determined to defend its wealth and power through repression at home and aggression abroad.



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