

David Greenglass, star witness against the Rosenbergs, dies at 92

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David Greenglass, one of the last surviving major figures from the notorious espionage case that led to the executions of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in 1953, has died at the age of 92.

The star witness in the sensational trial that sent both his sister and his brother-in-law to their deaths, Greenglass was rewarded for his cooperation with a lesser sentence, serving nine-and-a-half years in prison before living out the rest of his life under an assumed name.

The conviction of the Rosenbergs on conspiracy charges, after a trial that was characterized by prosecutorial and judicial misconduct, is now widely recognized as a legal travesty. Their executions—compared to short prison sentences for such figures as Klaus Fuchs and other British defendants convicted on more serious charges during this period—are an especially odious illustration of the vindictiveness and savagery of US imperialism as it pursues its global aims.

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, members of the Communist Party, were still in their early to mid-30s when they were arrested in 1950. David Greenglass, Ethel's younger brother and a member of the Young Communist League, also was arrested at this time. He became a crucial witness at the 1951 trial, testifying that he had been recruited by Julius to steal "atomic secrets" while stationed as an army soldier at Los Alamos, New Mexico in 1945.

Greenglass helped the government strengthen a weak conspiracy case against Julius Rosenberg, but in addition he corroborated the account of his wife Ruth, who testified that Ethel had typed up the notes from Los Alamos that David had passed to Julius in June 1945.

Fifty years later, Sam Roberts, a reporter for the *New York Times*, caught up to Greenglass and recorded hours of interviews with him, which led to a book, *"The Brother: The Untold Story of the Rosenberg Case."* Greenglass admitted that he had lied on the witness stand. He said that he could not recall who had done the typing, adding, "I frankly think my wife did the typing, but I don't remember."

To save his own skin and shield his wife from the threat of prosecution, Greenglass sent his innocent sister to the electric chair. "My wife is more important to me than my sister," he told Roberts. "Or my mother or my father, OK? And she was the mother of my children."

Roberts later told National Public Radio that Greenglass "was a man who impressed me [as] having very little morality, a man governed by situational ethics, a man who was narcissistic and who certainly did things without any sense of consequences whatsoever."

Greenglass also said he was encouraged by the prosecution to perjure himself. The calculation was that Ethel would be broken by the threat of execution and convinced to turn against her husband in much the same way that Greenglass had turned against his sister.

Ethel Rosenberg, however, refused to cooperate. She and her husband bravely went to their deaths on June 19, 1953, leaving two young sons as orphans. Greenglass was sentenced to 15 years in prison, and served less than 10.

The frame-up of Ethel Rosenberg was further documented by the release of declassified grand jury transcripts six years ago. These transcripts contradicted the trial testimony. Ruth Greenglass told the grand jury, "I wrote [the atomic bomb information] down on a piece of paper..." At the trial she claimed that Ethel Rosenberg had typed up the information.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the release of Soviet records indicated that Julius had engaged in low-level espionage and that Ethel was guilty of nothing. There is little question that the prosecution knew this in 1951, but cynically pursued the case for broader political purposes.

Leslie Groves, the general who headed the Los Alamos project to develop the atom bomb that was used with such deadly consequences in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, openly admitted these calculations. He called the information that Julius is said to have delivered to the USSR minor in importance. This was Groves' opinion in 1954, a year after the executions, as reported by Sam Roberts. "I would never say that publicly," he declared, in testimony that has just been declassified. "Irrespective of the value of that in the over-all picture, the Rosenbergs deserved to hang."

Julius Rosenberg was at most guilty of attempting to aid an ally of the US during the Second World War, an offense for which a lengthy prison term, not to mention the death sentence, was barely conceivable. The political winds shifted quickly in the postwar period, however.

This was indicated even in the closing months of the world war, when Vice President Henry Wallace, considered too friendly to the left, was dropped from the ticket as Franklin Roosevelt ran for a fourth term. The use of the atom bombs on Japan was another brutal geostrategic move, a warning to the Soviet Union and all other potential enemies or rivals of American imperialism.

Even as the political establishment moved sharply to curtail civil liberties and initiate a new Red Scare, new global challenges to imperialism emerged, including the Chinese Revolution that culminated in 1949, closely followed by the beginning of the Korean War.

The period from the arrest to the execution of the Rosenbergs coincided roughly with the high point of the witchhunt, spearheaded by the notorious Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, and presided over by the administrations of both Democrat Harry Truman and Republican Dwight Eisenhower, elected in November 1952. This was

the period in which the anti-communist bureaucracy solidified its grip on the American labor movement. The Rosenberg case was directed against the American as well as the international working class.

The Rosenbergs, along with so many others, were unprepared for the escalating witchhunt. They were virtually abandoned by the Communist Party. Although millions of people around the world expressed their anger and revulsion at the threat of execution, the opposition remained on the defensive.

The Rosenbergs pled the Fifth Amendment at the trial in refusing to discuss their political beliefs, rather than proclaiming their views and clearly exposing the political motives behind the prosecution. The main purpose of the prosecution of the Rosenbergs and the imposition of the death sentence was to intimidate and silence popular opposition to the Korean War and, in general, the Cold War policies pursued by the ruling class.

Another important element in the Rosenberg trial was the government's indirect encouragement of anti-Semitism. Although at least 30 percent of the population of New York City at the time was Jewish, there was not one Jewish juror.

At the same time, as a further signal that Jews could absolve themselves of suspicion by demonstrating their patriotism, several Jews figured prominently in the prosecution. The case was tried before Irving R. Kaufman, and the prosecution team was headed by Irving Saypol. Assisting Saypol was a young assistant district attorney, the notorious Roy Cohn, who went on to greater prominence alongside McCarthy and his various Senate committee investigations.

Cohn later claimed that he had been instrumental in insuring the selection of both Kaufman and Saypol for the trial. Kaufman is alleged to have discussed the death sentences with the prosecution, a blatant violation of judicial ethics.

In imposing the sentences, the judge explicitly connected the alleged crimes to the Rosenbergs' political views, and accused them of responsibility for the deaths of US soldiers in Korea. Kaufman went on to a lengthy career as a justice on the federal Court of Appeals and a few years before his death in 1992 was awarded the Medal of Freedom by Ronald Reagan.

The deceit and lawlessness that characterized the prosecution of the Rosenbergs assumed truly monstrous proportions in the days leading up to their execution. On June 17, 1953, just one day before the date set for the execution, lawyers in Tennessee who were working independently on behalf of the Rosenbergs, raised a major issue of law with Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas.

The Rosenbergs had been sentenced to death for conspiring to violate the Espionage Act of 1917. However, that law had been superseded by the Atomic Energy Act of 1946, which was, therefore, in force for at least part of the time during which the Rosenbergs were alleged to have committed their crimes. Unlike the Espionage Act, the Atomic Energy Act stipulated that the death penalty could not be imposed by a judge unless there was a specific recommendation by the jury that capital punishment be applied. The jury in the Rosenberg case had made no such recommendation.

Judge Douglas granted a stay of execution until the full Supreme Court had time to consider the ramifications of the new legal issue. As the court had begun its summer recess and several justices had already left Washington, Douglas assumed that another two to three months would pass before the arguments were heard. During that time, he hoped, there would be a cooling of the passions surrounding the case.

What Douglas failed to anticipate, however, was the egregious misconduct of the Supreme Court's chief justice, Fred Vinson, and

the attorney-general of the Eisenhower administration, Herbert Brownell. After learning of the stay granted by Douglas, Brownell contacted Vinson, urging him to immediately call the Supreme Court back into session so that the stay could be vacated. Further delay in the execution of the Rosenbergs, Brownell insisted, would be harmful to the Eisenhower administration's conduct of foreign policy.

Vinson called the court back into session on June 18. It was the scene of acrimonious argument among the judges. On June 19, the court voted 6-3 to vacate the stay and proceed immediately with the execution.

The killing of the Rosenbergs was set for 11 pm that evening at Sing Sing Penitentiary in New York State. When the Rosenbergs' attorneys, now desperate, appealed for a further delay on the grounds that the Jewish couple should not be executed on the evening of the Sabbath, Judge Irving Kaufman ordered that the execution be moved up three hours to 8 pm, minutes before sundown.

As thousands assembled in New York's Union Square on the evening of Friday, June 19, to protest the execution, news came that the Rosenbergs had been put to death.

The name of David Greenglass has become synonymous with cowardice and selfishness. His death casts a spotlight on a case that ranks, alongside that of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, as a travesty of justice. While Greenglass is worthy of our contempt, the Rosenbergs must be recognized as principled opponents of oppression and exploitation. They take their place, alongside Sacco, Vanzetti and many others, as victims of capitalist reaction.

The Rosenberg case is more than 60 years old, but the issues of witch-hunting, the targeting of political opposition, and the whipping up of chauvinism as part of the drive toward imperialist war, are just as prominent today as they were in the mid-20th century.



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