
- Meeropol, Robert, and Meeropol, Michael. We Are Your Sons: The Legacy of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. Houghton Mifflin, 1975. (Written by the sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.)


E.L. Doctorow’s novel The Book of Daniel is based on the Rosenberg case, especially the struggles of their children. It was made into the movie Daniel in 1983. A 1997 television documentary shown on the Discovery Channel, The Rosenberg File: Case Closed, features interviews with Alexander Fekotiv.

**LANDMARK AMERICAN TRIALS**

**JULIUS AND ETHEL ROSENBERG**

In New York City in 1951, six years after the first atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, and in the midst of post-World War II anti-Communist fervor, Julius Rosenberg and his wife, Ethel, were tried for conspiracy to commit espionage. The trial has been the subject of controversy for nearly 50 years. Some see the Rosenbergs as victims of a hysterical fear of Communism that lasted in the U.S. through most of the 1950’s. Others see them as criminals who compromised the nation’s security and deserved the punishment they received, which was execution. Both the Rosenbergs maintained their innocence to the end.

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The Cold War, the Nuclear Age, and the Fear of Communism

**Background**

The Cold War, the Nuclear Age, and the Fear of Communism were significant events that marked the early 1950s. The Cold War was a period of political and military tension between the United States and the Soviet Union, which began after World War II. The Nuclear Age refers to the era when nuclear weapons became a reality, starting with the atomic bombings of Japan in 1945. The fear of Communism was widespread during this time, as the Soviet Union was seen as a threat to the capitalist systems in the United States and other Western countries.

**The Cold War**

The Cold War, which lasted from 1947 to 1991, was a period of political and military tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. The United States and its allies were engaged in an ideological conflict with the Soviet Union and its allies, which the United States viewed as a threat to its own values and interests. The Cold War was characterized by a balance of power, with each side seeking to outdo the other in terms of military and economic strength.

**The Nuclear Age**

The Nuclear Age refers to the era when nuclear weapons became a reality, starting with the atomic bombings of Japan in 1945. The United States and the Soviet Union were the first countries to develop and use nuclear weapons, and this led to a tense standoff that lasted for decades. The nuclear weapons were capable of causing mass destruction, and this led to a focus on arms control and disarmament.

**The Fear of Communism**

The fear of Communism was widespread during the Cold War, as the Soviet Union and other communist countries were seen as a threat to the capitalist systems in the United States and other Western countries. The fear of Communism was fueled by the belief that communism would spread to other countries, and this led to a focus on containing communism and preventing its spread.

**Events of the Case**

- **1934** - Julius Rosenberg enrolls at City College of New York.
- **1939** - Ethel Greenglass marries Julius Rosenberg.
- **1940** - Julius hired as civilian employee of U.S. Signal Corps.
- **1943** - The Rosenbergs’ first son, Robert, is born.
- **1950** - The Rosenbergs’ second son, David, is born.
- **1951** - The Rosenbergs are convicted of conspiracy and espionage.
- **1952** - The Rosenbergs are sentenced to death.

**Other Events**

- **1945** - United States drops two atomic bombs on Japan. Dawn of the Nuclear Age.
- **1946** - Former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill delivers his “Iron Curtain” speech.
- **1947** - Truman delivers his “Chance for Peace” speech.
- **1949** - USSR announces that military has tested hydrogen bomb.
- **1950** - Korean War begins.
- **1951** - McCarthy delivers speech charging the House Un-American Activities Committee with “Communist imperialism.”
- **1953** - Rosenberg, Ethel and Julius are executed for espionage.

**The Issues**

The trial of the Rosenbergs was historically important because it brought together many issues that were then, and still are, hotly debated in the United States. Some of these issues are:

- **Communism**: Although the Communist Party is no longer a factor in American politics, in the 1930s it attracted many sympathizers. The Cold War seemed to show that the upper classes were intent on exploiting the workers.
- **Labor Unions**: The struggle of American workers to form labor unions – a struggle often met with violent oppression – seemed to show that the system was fundamentally flawed. At the same time, the struggle of American employees, and many people lost their jobs. This search for suspected Communist agents, often innocent, led to a purge of Communists from government jobs.
- **Psychological Blow**: The Rosenbergs’ execution was an overreaction to the Cold War hysteria of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Americans saw their executions as a psychological blow to the country.
- **Free Speech**: The Rosenbergs’ trial was the first major test of free speech under the First Amendment.

**Important People**

- **Rosenberg, Ethel and Julius**: Born Ethel Greenglass in 1915. Wife of Julius; executed in 1953; tried and convicted of espionage.
- **David Greenglass**: Born in 1918. Became a Communist during the 1930s and acted as an agent for the Soviet Union.
- **Kaufman, Irving**: Prosecution witness in the Rosenberg trial.
- **Greenglass, Ruth**: Wife of David Greenglass. She makes a deal with the prosecution and testifies against Ethel Rosenberg. She is never indicted.
- **Douglas, William O.**: Judge in the Rosenberg trial.
- **Cohn, Roy**: Assistant to the prosecution team, he aggressively questions Ethel Rosenberg.
- **Kaufman, Irving**: Confessed spy who implicated David Greenglass in espionage.
- **Fleischman, Robert**: Retired KGB colonel who says in the 1990s that Julius Rosenberg was one of his agents and calls him a “hero.” He says, however, that Julius’s help was minimal and denies that Ethel Rosenberg engaged in espionage.
- **Fuchs, Klaus**: German-born physicist who worked on the U.S. development of the atomic bomb. He was convicted in 1950 of spying for the Soviet Union.
- **Greenglass, Edward**: David Greenglass’s brother, assigned to work on atomic bomb project, Los Alamos, N.M.
- **Greenglass, David**: Ethel Rosenberg’s younger brother; after being arrested he identifies his wife and his brother-in-law, Julius Rosenberg, as members of a Soviet spy ring.
- **Hoover, J. Edgar**: Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) from 1924 to 1972. During the Cold War he became a symbol of anti-Communism.
- **Rosenberg, Ethel**: Born Ethel Greenglass in 1915. Wife of Julius; executed in 1953 although she was probably innocent.
- **Rosenberg, Julius**: Wisconsin senator who becomes famous and controversial in the early 1950s by charging that various U.S. government agencies harbor Communist infiltrators. The general figure in what has been called the Communist “witch hunt” of the period.
- **Kaufman, Irving**: Judge in the Rosenberg trial.
- **Kunz, Edward**: Attorney representing Morton Sobell. He convinces Sobell not to take the stand, which was probably a mistake.
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