

It was billed as the trial of the century. On March 29, 1951, while the United States and the Soviet Union were in the throes of the Cold War, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted of conspiring to steal designs for America's atomic bomb and delivering them to Soviet secret agents. Two years later, they were executed in the electric chair, leaving behind two young sons and a nation bitterly divided about the extent of their crimes and whether the death penalty was justified.

"Nothing seemed more important to Americans than that we safeguard the atomic secret from the Soviets," says Doug Linder, a law professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. "This espionage plot was a startling thing."

Growing Soviet Power

Startling because, soon after the end of World War II, America's very survival seemed to be at stake in a cold war that pitted the U.S. and other democratic countries against Communist nations led by the Soviet Union. The Soviets had been U.S. allies in the fight against Germany, but after the war ended in 1945, it became clear that Moscow was intent on taking over vast sections of Eastern Europe and installing Communist puppet regimes (*see timeline, p. 18*).

In 1948, the Soviets blockaded democratic West Berlin, prompting the U.S. and its allies to launch a yearlong airlift of food and supplies and raising fears that the Cold War would turn hot. By the summer of 1949, Mao Zedong was on the verge of winning his own Communist revolution in China (which he did in October), making the U.S. even more concerned about Communist expansion around the world.

The U.S., however, assumed it had the upper hand militarily because it was the only country in the world with the atomic bomb—which it had used twice against Japan to end World War II.

But on Sept. 3, 1949, a U.S. spy plane cruising off Siberia detected unusually high levels of radioactivity, indicating that the Soviets had abruptly ended America's nuclear monopoly by testing their own atomic bomb. That same month, a five-year-old Soviet message, finally deciphered by U.S. government code breakers, revealed that Russian agents had infiltrated America's secret atomic research program,

known as the Manhattan Project (so named because it originated in an obscure office in New York City).

That the industrially backward Soviet Union had developed nuclear weapons just four years after the U.S. did suggested that the Soviets had stolen secrets from America's wartime research facility in Los Alamos, New Mexico.

But how? The investigation triggered by the code breakers led American intelligence agents to a German-born scientist who spied for the Soviets from Los Alamos. He pointed the agents to his courier, a chemist from Philadelphia, who in turn fingered a machinist who had also worked at Los Alamos: On June 15, 1950, the F.B.I. knocked on the door of David Greenglass, a 28-year-old father of two living on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

After being interrogated for eight hours, Greenglass confessed to providing the Soviets with a crude sketch of the bomb and other secrets, beginning in 1944. He also implicated his wife, Ruth, as a courier and his brother-in-law, Julius Rosenberg, a City College engineering graduate and Greenglass's partner in a failing machine shop in New York City.

Greenglass testified that he had been recruited to espionage by Julius and by his own sister, Ethel Rosenberg, a housewife caring for two young sons. (Greenglass later told a jury that Julius had given him half of a torn Jell-O carton flap and that a spy courier would

identify himself by presenting him with the matching half.)

The Rosenbergs had become active in Communist organizations in the 1930s, when to some Americans, capitalism seemed to be broken. The Great Depression, spawned in part by excesses on Wall Street, had left millions out of work, with the U.S. government unable to get the nation back on its feet. Thinking there must be a better system, Americans with Communist sympathies looked toward the Soviet Union—naively, it turned out—as a utopia where work was guaranteed and discrimination, still common in the U.S., was outlawed.

McCarthy Witch Hunts

Greenglass agreed to cooperate with investigators if his wife was spared prosecution. Within two months of his confession, the Rosenbergs were jailed and charged with conspiracy to commit espionage.

From the beginning, the government hoped the charges against Ethel would persuade Julius to confess. Prosecutors wanted evidence so they could prosecute other members of the spy ring, some of whom had been identified by the Venona Project, a secret collaboration between American and British intelligence agencies that had decoded Soviet messages. (The government didn't want to reveal that Army intelligence had

The Rosenberg Case: Who's Who

Julius Rosenberg
Accused of helping to organize spy ring to steal atomic secrets for Soviets. Executed June 19, 1953, at age 35. Maintained innocence till the end.



married



Ethel Rosenberg
Probably played only minor role in espionage but was used as lever to make Julius confess—which he never did. Executed June 19, 1953, at 37.

Ruth Greenglass
On Julius's behalf, invited David into spy ring. Occasional courier. Served no time because of deal David cut. Lived under alias until her death in 2008, at age 83.



Recruited David



married

David Greenglass
Confessed to spying, implicated Julius and Ethel. Sentenced to 15 years in federal prison. Now lives under alias, probably in New York.

Passed secrets to Soviet agents through couriers

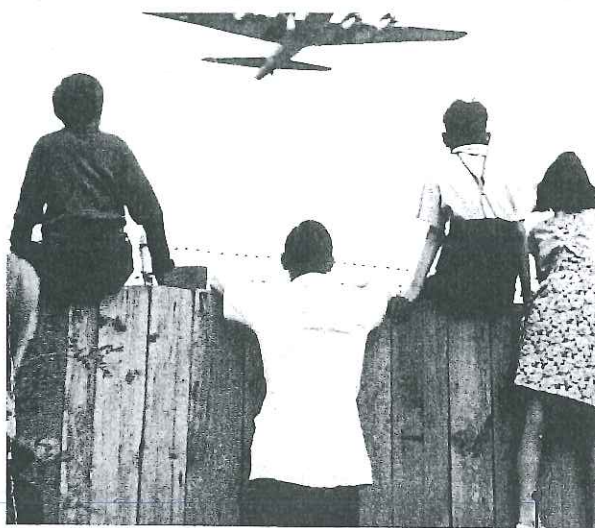
Sam Roberts is urban affairs correspondent for *The New York Times* and author of *"The Brother: The Untold Story of the Rosenberg Case."*



TIMELINE America and the Cold War: 1945-1991

1945 Yalta Conference

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin meet at Yalta, in the Soviet Union, to plan for postwar Europe.

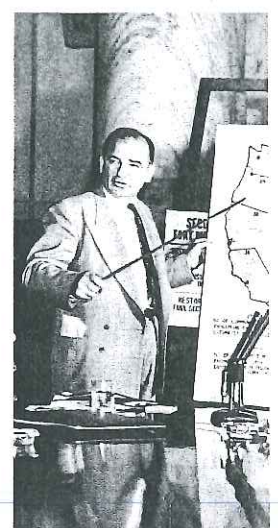


1946 Iron Curtain

The Soviet Union begins installing Communist regimes across Central and Eastern Europe, prompting Churchill to declare that an "Iron Curtain" has fallen across the continent.

1948-49 Berlin Airlift

In June 1948, the Soviets blockade West Berlin, the only part of East Germany not under its control. A yearlong U.S.-led airlift keeps the city's residents from starving. The blockade ends in May 1949.



1950s Red Scare

Sen. Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin says the State Department is "infested" with Communists. A decade of investigations into Communist infiltration in government and Hollywood follows.

broken the Soviets' wartime code. Except, as it turned out, the Russians already knew.)

But by February 1951, with the trial only weeks away, the government barely had enough evidence to convict Ethel, much less threaten her with the death penalty. It was only then that Ruth Greenglass told prosecutors that she remembered Ethel typing David's secret notes in 1945, while he was on military leave in New York. David confirmed her account.

The trial riveted the nation. It generated front-page headlines about Soviet skulduggery, American vulnerability, and the spectacle of a brother testifying against his sister.

Fear was palpable. With Americans worried about the nuclear arms race, "duck and cover" drills were becoming standard in schools, with children practicing huddling under their desks in case of a Soviet attack. And there was fear of infiltration by an "enemy within"—foreign spies and American sympathizers—heightened by Senator Joseph McCarthy's overheated witch hunts for suspected Communists in the State Department and Hollywood. Movie stars were being summoned before congressional committees and ordered to name colleagues who were Communists. People suspected their neighbors of being "reds."

Those fears also undermined the Rosenbergs'

the information Greenglass was accused of giving the Soviets largely corroborated secrets the Soviets already had through other spies.

Summing up for the jury in a New York courtroom, prosecutor Irving Saypol said the Rosenbergs "stole the most important scientific secrets ever known to mankind from this country and delivered them to the Soviet Union." And, invoking the Greenglasses' testimony, Saypol declared that Ethel Rosenberg, on countless occasions "sat at that typewriter and struck the keys, blow by blow, against her own country and in the interests of the Soviets."

Was Ethel Innocent?

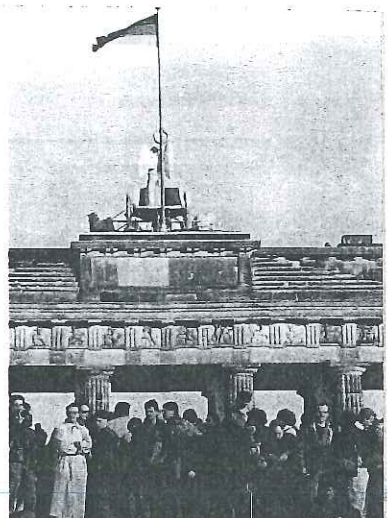
After deliberating for less than eight hours, the jury returned a guilty verdict. A week later, Judge Irving R. Kaufman sentenced David Greenglass to 15 years' imprisonment and both Rosenbergs to death. The sentence touched off two years of legal appeals to the Supreme Court, and a worldwide campaign for clemency from those who believed they were innocent or that their crimes didn't warrant the death penalty.

But on Friday, June 19, 1953, with the government still pressing the couple to confess and President Dwight D. Eisenhower denying a reprieve, the Rosenbergs were executed at



Jell-O for Spies: A recreation of the torn carton that helped David Greenglass identify his courier was evidence in the Rosenberg trial.

defense. More-competent lawyers who could have represented the couple shunned the case. So did scientists who might have testified that



1951 The Rosenbergs

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are convicted of conspiracy to share U.S. secrets with the Soviet Union. They are sentenced to death and executed two years later.

1950-53 Korean War

Communist North Korea invades South Korea in June 1950. U.S.-led U.N. forces defend South Korea with China backing the North. The war ends in a stalemate, after 36,000 American deaths.

1962 Cuban Missile Crisis

U.S. spy planes discover nuclear sites being built in Cuba by the Soviets. After a tense 13-day standoff and fears of nuclear war, the Soviets back down.

1965-75 Vietnam War

The U.S. sends troops to aid South Vietnam in its war against Communist North Vietnam, which is supported by the Soviets and the Chinese. By the war's end in 1975, 58,000 Americans have died.

1989-91 Berlin Wall Falls

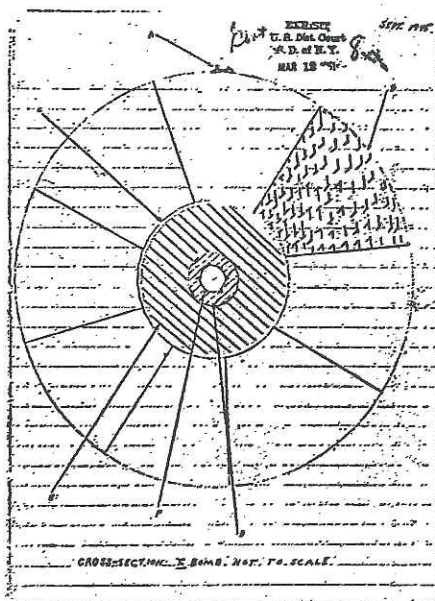
Protests in East Berlin bring down the wall that divided it from West Berlin for 28 years, and Germany is reunited the following year. In 1991, the Soviet Union dissolves, marking the end of the Cold War.

Sing Sing prison in Ossining, N.Y. Julius was 35. Ethel was 37.

Their sons, Michael, who was 10, and Robert, 6, were rejected by their maternal grandmother, excluded from schools, and shuttled between foster homes. In 1954, they went to live with Anne and Abel Meeropol (both teachers) in New York and adopted their name. Except to close friends, they kept their identities a secret until 1973, when they sued an author for their parents' death house letters. Then, for years, they vigorously and publicly defended their parents.

But revelations from intercepted Soviet spy communications made public in 1995, four years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, confirmed that Julius had been a spy. And in 2008, a co-defendant with the Rosenbergs who'd been sentenced to 30 years in prison admitted that he had been a Soviet agent and that Julius was too.

Greenglass, after having been released in 1960 and vanishing into obscurity, acknowledged in 2001 that he had corroborated his wife's account of Ethel's typing—the single most incriminating evidence against Ethel—because he didn't want to contradict her, even though he suspected that Ruth herself had done the typing.



The atom bomb sketch David Greenglass provided to the Soviets

In the end, no matter how Americans felt about the Rosenbergs, the case came to be seen as emblematic of the crushing fear of the McCarthy years. In some ways, a similar fear gripped Americans after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks on New

York and Washington, D.C. Faced with a real threat of enemy assault at home—this time by Muslim suicide bombers rather than Communists—many Americans feared infiltration by terrorists, and still do.

And much as it had during the McCarthy years, the government assumed broader legal powers, once again raising questions about how to manage the delicate balance between the nation's security and the protection of civil liberties (*see Debate, p. 22*).

Indeed, though the number of people who believe the Rosenbergs were innocent has dwindled, the government's handling of the case is still a matter for debate.

Allen Weinstein, a Cold War historian, says that even many who think Julius Rosenberg was a spy who recruited his brother-in-law to steal atomic secrets "believe that his death sentence should never have been issued or carried out." As for Ethel, he adds, evidence suggests that she probably knew about her husband's spying but at most played "a minor supporting role."

And had the case unfolded in a different political climate, he thinks things might have played out much better for Ethel. "Her actions might have led only to a brief jail term," says Weinstein. "Perhaps not even to her arrest." ●