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“As an American, may I have the privilege of pulling the switch?” : The Fate of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg During the Second Red Scare in Cold War America

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Honors in
the Russian and Eastern European Studies Program

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ABSTRACT

PETERS, MORGAN
Rosenberg
War America

A Family Affair: The Fate of Julius and Ethel
During the Second Red Scare in Cold

The Cold War escalated at the end of World War II when the tension between the United States and Soviet Union significantly increased. The stakes of the Cold War were considerably high, especially during the atomic age. Hence the creation of the Venona Project, which began in 1943 and was originally a small project intended to break down Soviet diplomatic communications, but later expanded to be a full-blown counterintelligence operation. The project's American cryptologists took nearly two years to decode the first Soviet coded telegraph cable. The project exposed multiple Soviet Spies in the United States, some of the most famous being Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. The Rosenbergs were implicated when Ethel Rosenberg's brother, David Greenglass alerted the FBI to their involvement in a Soviet spy ring. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg never confessed to conspiracy to provide atomic secrets to the Soviet Union, and both were ultimately executed by electric chair in 1953. David Greenglass, who turned his family into the FBI, did not experience the same fate as his sister and brother-in-law. Through analysis of court documents, decoded cables, and media coverage of the trial, I discuss the four factors that led to the execution of the Rosenbergs and the legitimacy of their trial and its outcome. These factors include the location of the Rosenbergs, their Communist party membership, Ethel Rosenberg's submissive position as a woman in the 1950s, and anti-semitism in the United States.

Chapter One

The Cold War

While both the United States and the Soviet Union were allies during World War II, U.S. and Soviet relations took a turn for the worst after the war when Communist and Capitalist relations went rocky. While it is arguable that the Cold War began long before the end of World War II, geopolitical tensions escalated at the Potsdam conference in July of 1945 when the two argued about the joint occupation of Germany. This ultimately caused the already weak alliance to fall apart. Furthermore the United States' implementation of the Truman Doctrine as a part of their post-war foreign policy in 1947 also put a strain on the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. The United States offered aid to governments that were at risk of communist influence. The Marshall Plan followed the Truman Doctrine, similarly offering economic assistance to countries that were struggling with political stability after the Second World War.¹

A major component to the Cold War, that would later bring about the arms race was, the Manhattan Project. The Manhattan Project was the title given to America's effort to build the first atomic bomb. The major sites for the project included Oak Ridge, Tennessee, Hanford, Washington, and Los Alamos, New Mexico.² Both David Greenglass and Klaus Fuchs were stationed at the project site in Los Alamos, New Mexico.

¹ "The Cold War - John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum," accessed June 8, 2018, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/The-Cold-War.aspx>.

² "Manhattan Project Background Information and Preservation Work | Department of Environmental and Heritage Resources," accessed June 8, 2018, <https://www.nps.gov/manaag/department-of-management/operational-management/history/manhattan-project>.

McCarthyism

With tensions running at an all time high post-World War II, the McCarthy era began out of extreme paranoia that anybody could be a Russian spy in the United States. McCarthyism became a theme of the Cold War in the beginning of the 1950s when the senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, made a speech at a small Republican rally that would ultimately throw America back into a Red Scare. The rally took place in Wheeling Virginia on February 9th, 1950. McCarthy furiously demanded that the traitors working within the United States government must be removed in the following:

This is glaringly true in the State Department. There the bright young men who are born with silver spoons in their mouths are the ones who have been most traitorous. I have here in my hand a list of 205 names that were made known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping policy in the State Department. As you know, very recently the Secretary of State proclaimed his loyalty to a man guilty of what has always been considered as the most abominable of all crimes—being a traitor to the people who gave him a position of great trust—high treason. He has lighted the spark which is resulting in a moral uprising and will end only when the whole sorry mess of twisted, warped thinkers are swept from the national scene so that we may have a new birth of honesty and decency in government.³

This was not the first Red Scare to take place in the United States, similar events happened after World War I. The first Red Scare took place in the early twentieth century in response to the Russian Revolution, and the fear of Bolshevism. McCarthy

³ “‘Enemies from Within’: Senator Joseph R. McCarthy’s Accusations of Disloyalty,” accessed June 9, 2018, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6456>.

clearly began the second Red Scare at the highest level, accusing government officials of being spies for the Soviet Union.

McCarthy campaigned to find and remove any communist presence in the United States. This was a crucial tool he used for reelection. American conservatives were unhappy with how Democrats responded to Stalin during the war. Albert Fried states the Republican frustration that had been brewing since World War II in the following:

No sooner did World War II end than the far right, frustrated by America's four years of friendship with the Soviet Union and (relative) solicitude toward Communism, began testing anti-Communist waters. Republicans denounced the late President Roosevelt and the liberal Democrats who served in his administration for kowtowing to Stalin, sanctioning his conquests. The Republican sweep in the 1946 Congressional election, the first since 1928, convinced President Truman, if he still needed convincing, that he had to be conspicuously tough on Communism, lest the Republicans further exploit the issue to their benefit and his detriment.⁴

Clearly, Senator McCarthy was not alone in using people's fear of Communism to garner support, but he definitely went further than other politicians at that time. The popular fear of Communism and Soviet influence in the United States made McCarthyism a workable, supportable, and patriotic platform for the period.⁵ One of the items found in Ethel Rosenberg's prison cell shows how this ideology became closely associated with patriotism in the following, "a telegram to the warden from Mary Bell Herchenroeder of Chicago that asked, 'As an American, may I have the privilege of pulling the switch?'"⁶

⁴ Albert Fried, *McCarthyism: The Great American Red Scare*. (Oxford University Press, 1996): 4.

⁵ J.M. Carter, *Encyclopedia of American Studies* (John Hopkins University Press, 2016).

⁶ Jennifer Jordan, "Last Words From Sing Sing Exhibited," *The Washington Post*. October, 2000. Accessed June 13, 2018, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/aponline/20001018/aponline125718_000.htm?noredirect=on.

Even President Truman, before McCarthy had come to the front, had recognized that he would have to show a tough anti-Communist front if he wanted to be successful, and avoid issues with the right. Truman enacted policies to show a strong anti-Communist front, such as the Truman Doctrine; he was forced to take considerable actions domestically as to not look negligent. He also allowed the creation of Loyalty review boards in his administration. If a member of the Truman administration had any ties to questionable organizations, which was determined by the attorney general, one would have to undergo an inquisitorial hearing. Fried writes:

Numerous legislative and administrative committees held highly publicized inquisitorial hearings, the object being to defame and humiliate their victims. Prestigious liberal organizations hastily purged themselves of alleged Communists. After a year-long trial, a New York jury convicted eleven Communist party leaders of advocating the violent overthrow of the government, the prelude, once they exhausted their appeals, to wholesale arrests of other party officials.⁷

This all took place before the Senator McCarthy and McCarthysim became mainstream, which reveals how high up the Cold War paranoia reached pre-McCarthysim. It is also apparent that there was a serious left and right conflict in the middle of the second red scare, as many liberal organizations had to clean their hands of anyone that could be argued to be Communist.

Furthermore, extreme anti-Communist rhetoric, which was mostly coming from the right, became policy in 1950 with the passing of the McCarran Internal Security Act. This Act was controversial, as President Truman vetoed it calling it “a long step toward

⁷ Fried, *McCarthyism: The Great American Red Scare*, 4.

totalitarianism”.⁸ The Internal Security Act made it illegal to “combine, conspire, or agree with any other person to perform any act which would substantially contribute to the establishment of a totalitarian dictatorship”.⁹

The Venona Project

The American paranoia that is so apparent in McCarthyism began well before the 1950s as seen in the Venona Project. The Venona Project, which began in 1943, was originally a small project that was intended to break down Soviet diplomatic communications. It would later expand to be a full-blown espionage operation. It took nearly two whole years for American cryptologists to break KGB coded telegraph cables. One of the first cables that was decoded was about the Manhattan Project, and the atomic bomb. The program was canceled in 1980. The Venona Project is famous for exposing Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, as well as their brother and sister-in-law David and Ruth Greenglass. There were twenty-one decoded Soviet cables from 1944 to 1945 that discussed Julius Rosenberg, who’s codename was “Antenna”, and would later become “Liberal”.¹⁰

From 1948 to 1951, the project continued to expose other major KGB espionage agents including Klaus Fuchs, Harry Gold, Theodore Hall, William Perl, Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, Kim Philby, and Harry D. White. The project would not become

⁸ Carter, "McCarthyism", *Encyclopedia of American Studies*.

⁹ "McCarran Act or Internal Security Act of 1950," accessed June 8, 2018, <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/mccarran-act-intro.html>.

¹⁰ "NOVA Online | Secrets, Lies, and Atomic Spies | Read Venona Intercepts: September 21, 1944," accessed June 9, 2018, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/venona/inte_19440921.html.

declassified until 1995, nearly 50 years after the first Soviet cables had been decoded. One of the last documents to become declassified was in September of 1997.

When looking for patterns in my research, the secondary literature often approaches the Rosenbergs and the Greenglass in two ways. The first way, which most commonly applies to the Rosenbergs, is the sympathizing approach. Many secondary sources cite issues such as anti-Semitism and unconstitutional trials, which led ultimately to the “murder” of the Rosenbergs.

The other approach commonly taken by secondary literature is what I call the McCarthyism approach, that focuses on the overwhelming fear of Communism in the United States and Soviet espionage. This is what ultimately makes the Rosenberg’s trial, and execution a national controversy. When looking at the period of time that the secondary literature is published, it is important to note that the sympathetic secondary sources are most commonly from the present period, or at least after the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s. Secondary literature also focuses greatly on a lot of speculation. Many address the actual facts of the case, but it is disputed how legitimate the case actually was against the Rosenbergs.

The primary sources used are crucial to show the timeline of my argument. They also show how little remorse existed for the Rosenbergs, which would later come out in more recent secondary literature. This is because of the hard Anti-Communist propaganda, and front that the government and media took during the Cold War. Major primary sources used are the decrypted cables from the Venona Project, as well as government documents covering the Rosenbergs from arrest until their execution.

These documents help answer the question, why did the Rosenbergs receive such a harsh punishment compared to others charged with espionage during the Cold War? What set the couple apart from their brother and sister-in-law? Both these primary and secondary sources also help show the major factors that led to the Rosenbergs' execution including their location, communist party membership, Ethel Rosenberg's submissive position as a woman during the 1950s, and anti-semitism in the United States during the twentieth century.

Chapter Two

Julius Rosenberg was born on May 12th, 1918 in Manhattan, New York. Ethel Greenglass was born on September 28th, 1915 also in Manhattan. The two met in the 1930s, and wed in 1939. The same year, Julius Rosenberg graduated college with a degree in electrical engineering that found him his job as a civil engineer for the U.S. Army Signal Corps. At the same time, Ethel Rosenberg worked as a clerk beginning after her graduation from high school. Both were active members of the Communist Party from early adulthood, which would ultimately lead to Julius Rosenberg being discharged from the army in 1945 for not being truthful about his political affiliations.¹¹ Julius Rosenberg later began to share United States military secrets with the Soviet Union; it is speculated that Ethel Rosenberg helped Julius in his espionage efforts. The information collected by Julius Rosenberg was given to Harry Gold, a courier and another member of the espionage ring, who would then pass it on to the Soviet Union's Vice Consul in New York. The Rosenbergs' connection to Gold would lead to their exposing by David Greenglass, Ethel's brother. Gold was arrested in May of 1950, from evidence of his participation in Soviet espionage with Klaus Fuchs, which was discovered by the Venona Project.¹²

¹¹ "Julius Rosenberg and Ethel Rosenberg | American Spies," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed June 9, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julius-Rosenberg-and-Ethel-Rosenberg>.

¹² "Julius Rosenberg and Ethel Rosenberg | American Spies."

Klaus Fuchs, an English physicist, was one of the first Soviet Spies discovered by the Venona Project. A cable from February 9th, 1944 discussed a meeting between Fuchs and Gold about the Manhattan Project, which Fuchs was working on. Fuchs began working on the Manhattan project in late 1943, after being sent to the United States from England with other British scientists for the sole purpose of merging the two countries' "atom bomb efforts".¹³ Fuchs first began his position in the Manhattan Project at Columbia University, and later was transferred to a different division of the project in 1944 that was located in Los Alamos, New Mexico. In 1946 after the war ended, Fuchs returned to England to work on their own atomic bomb project.

When the cable regarding Fuchs' meeting was decoded in 1949, the FBI gave the information to British Intelligence. Fuchs confessed to espionage, and was sentenced to 14 years in prison. Harry Gold was exposed when the FBI searched through Fuchs home and finding evidence of their relationship and his long term spying for the Soviet Union. Solomon Andhil Fineberg describes Fuchs' relationship to the rest of the spy ring in the following:

Fuchs did not know Greenglass and the Rosenbergs. He did not even know the identity of the spy ring (Harry Gold) who took information from him in New Mexico and delivered it to Anatoli Yakovlev, a Russian diplomatic agent in New York. Fuchs could only describe the courier as a well-qualified chemical engineer. Finally, when the FBI showed him various photographs, Fuchs identified one of Harry Gold.¹⁴

¹³ "NOVA Online | Secrets, Lies, and Atomic Spies | Read Venona Intercepts: February 9, 1944," accessed June 9, 2018, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/venona/inte_19440209.html.

¹⁴ Solomon Andhil Fineberg, *The Rosenberg Case: Fact and Fiction* (Oceana Publications, 1953): 14.

Harry Gold was then arrested and confessed to being involved in espionage, and was sentenced to 30 years in prison. He only served 16 years, and was then released on parole in 1966. Klaus Fuchs is argued to have shared the most valuable secrets, but he only receives jail time while the Rosenbergs are executed. David Kaiser explains a report of the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Espionage that expresses the impact of what Klaus Fuchs passed on to the Soviets in the following:

The Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, for example, explained in its April 1951 report on Soviet Atomic Espionage that ‘it is little appreciated that Fuchs’ was ‘the great betrayer of the theory’ underlying uranium isotope separation at Oak Ridge. Based on ‘Fuchs’s grasp of the theoretical principles involved,’ they reported, ‘he would be able to reconstitute our whole program [at Oak Ridge] from only scattered pieces of information’—rebuilding an entire city of industrial production from a few scraps of paper.¹⁵

Clearly the information shared by Fuchs with the Soviets was inarguably valuable to their atomic program, and he still only received a prison sentence, compared to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

Decoded cable documents would also be evidence of the Julius Rosenberg’s involvement in Soviet Espionage. But Ethel and Julius were not exposed directly by the Venona Project. Harry Gold’s confession led the FBI to David Greenglass, Ethel’s brother, who also was working on the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos. When confronted, Greenglass revealed his sister and brother-in-laws involvement in the Soviet spy ring. He also implicated his wife Ruth, specifically in how Julius recruited

¹⁵ David Kaiser. “The Atomic Secret in Red Hands? American Suspicions of Theoretical Physicists During the Early Cold War”. *Representations*. (2005): 41.

David Greenglass through Ruth. Ruth told Julius about David's work in Los Alamos. Ruth Greenglass' name was mentioned in a cable from September 21st, 1944 that was decoded by the Venona Project. The cable stated, "Ruth learned that her husband was called up by the army but he was not sent to the front. he is a mechanical engineer and now working at the [Atomic Energy Project] plant in Santa Fe, New Mexico".¹⁶ Ruth and David Greenglass told the FBI that Ethel was aware of her husband's spying efforts for the USSR, and that she had helped type documents to be shared with the Soviets. David Greenglass was sentenced to 15 years in prison, and Ruth Greenglass escaped any charges.

Location as a Major Factor

It is important to note location when considering why the Rosenbergs were executed, and everyone else received prison sentences, that they never completed. New York City is the most famous city of the United States, as it is a cultural hub and houses major American institutions. Therefore, Americans would not be interested in hearing about David Greenglass in Los Alamos, New Mexico. The government was better able to sell that anyone could be a spy much more easily by making a couple from Manhattan the spectacle. The government and all major News outlets are located on the East Coast. Therefore, stories that happen on the East Coast just matter more to the American public.

Another major point to consider when determining that location played a large role in the Rosenberg's executions is the reputation of the United States government

¹⁶ "NOVA Online | Secrets, Lies, and Atomic Spies | Read Venona Intercepts: September 21, 1944."

during the Cold War. Strategically, it was important to the United States government to appear strong at such tumultuous times. The government obviously came off as weak when it was revealed that there was a major spy ring involved in one of the most top secret Cold War operations, the Manhattan Project. It also was important for the United States to shift attention somewhat away from the Manhattan Project, as it was a classified operation regarding nuclear weapons. Soviet espionage within the program had the opportunity to make the government appear weak to the American public, and the Soviet's power to be all encompassing, as they were even aware of our nuclear program. This was obviously a sensitive subject as the fear of nuclear war was alive and present because of Cold War tensions. The fear of nuclear war, and the actual reality of it occurring would come to a head only about a decade after the Rosenbergs were executed with the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Communist Party Membership

Another major factor to consider when looking at why the Rosenbergs were executed is their public Communist party membership. As mentioned previously, the Rosenbergs had been members of the Communist Party from an early age, and did little to hide it as they continued their lives as young professionals. David Greenglass, who was at one point a member of the Young Communist League, made every effort to hide that secret from his past when trying to work on the Manhattan project. This arguably could've saved his life, as open Communist party membership probably led to the Rosenbergs' execution. Even if they had not been technically guilty of soviet espionage, they were guilty of being Communists in a democratic capitalist society. Robert

McFadden states, “To pass his security clearance for the most sensitive work of the war at Los Alamos, Mr. Greenglass disguised or omitted Communist associations in his background. For character and work references, he alerted the writers — all friends — how to respond, and only glowing reports came back. ‘All evidence indicates subject to be loyal, honest and discreet,’ Army intelligence reported”.¹⁷ The army likely argued this as well to cover their own mistake in allowing employees with a Communist background to work on the Manhattan Project.

While the execution of the Rosenbergs seemed like an obvious result of their crime to government officials and the mainstream media, there were large amounts of protest throughout their trial, and leading up to their execution. Eisenhower had just began his presidency when faced with the Rosenberg case. One of the major issues he had to deal with was deciding if they would receive executive clemency. Clearly they did not receive executive clemency, as they were executed by electric chair in 1953. Eisenhower declined stating: "The nature of the crime for which they have been found guilty and sentenced far exceeds that of the taking of the life of another citizen; it

¹⁷ “David Greenglass, the Brother Who Doomed Ethel Rosenberg, Dies at 92 - The New York Times,” accessed June 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/15/us/david-greenglass-spy-who-helped-seal-the-rosenbergs-doom-dies-at-92.html>.

involves the deliberate betrayal of the entire nation and could very well result in the death of many, many thousands of innocent citizens."¹⁸

¹⁸ "Eisenhower Presidential Library," *Julian and Ethel Rosenberg*, accessed June 9, 2018, https://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online_documents/rosenbergs.html.

Chapter Three

As Ethel Rosenberg was never mentioned in any of the soviet cables decoded by the Venona Project, it is a fair assumption made by multiple secondary sources that she was most likely not guilty. This conclusion stems not only from her brother's later admissions in life, but also the likelihood that she would be able to comprehend the complex nature of the physics notes she was typing for Julius. In the *New York Times* article, "David Greenglass, the Brother Who Doomed Ethel Rosenberg, Dies at 92" from October 14, 2014, Robert McFadden discussed Ethel's potential innocence in the following:

Sam Roberts, a *Times* editor and reporter, later found Mr. Greenglass and, after a 13-year effort, obtained 50 hours of interviews that led to a book, 'The Brother: The Untold Story of the Rosenberg Case.' In the book, Mr. Greenglass admitted that, to spare his wife from prosecution, he had testified that his sister typed his notes. In fact, he said, he could not recall who had done it. 'I don't remember that at all,' Mr. Greenglass said. 'I frankly think my wife did the typing, but I don't remember.' He said he had no regrets. 'My wife is more important to me than my sister. Or my mother or my father, O.K.? And she was the mother of my children. In a 2008 interview with Mr. Roberts, Mr. Sobell admitted that he had given military secrets to the Soviet Union, and concurred in what has become a consensus among historians: that the Greenglass-Rosenberg atomic bomb details were of little value to the Soviets, except to corroborate what they already knew, and that Ethel Rosenberg had played no active role in the conspiracy.'¹⁹

Clearly, Ethel Rosenberg's implication was not because she was guilty, but because her

¹⁹ "David Greenglass, the Brother Who Doomed Ethel Rosenberg, Dies at 92 - The New York Times."

brother was trying to shield his wife from the consequences of Soviet espionage. Ruth's grand jury transcripts do not mention Ethel, but she includes her in her trial testimony.²⁰

Ethel Rosenberg's downfall was that she knew how to type. She began working as a clerk after graduating high school. This required her to be an excellent typist, which was common for what was considered women's work during the mid 20th century. McFadden writes, "Referring to Ethel Rosenberg in ringing hyperbolic phrases, the chief prosecutor, Irving H. Saypol, declared, 'Just so had she, on countless other occasions, sat at that typewriter and struck the keys, blow by blow, against her own country in the interests of the Soviets.'"²¹ Clearly, the prosecutors used her ability to type as proof of her involvement in the Soviet espionage ring.

Women in the 1950s:

In order to better understand Ethel Rosenberg's innocence, it is important to look at the expected role of women during the 1950s and how this made Ethel vulnerable. Large numbers entered the labor force during the 1940s to fill wartime jobs, but upon the war ending it was expected of many women to return to the domestic sphere. Re-domestication of women continued well into the 1950s, as it was a period defined by conformity. The re-domestication of women during the Cold War is described in the following:

²⁰ Sam Roberts, *The Brother: The Untold Story of the Rosenberg Case* (Simon & Schuster, 2014): 36.

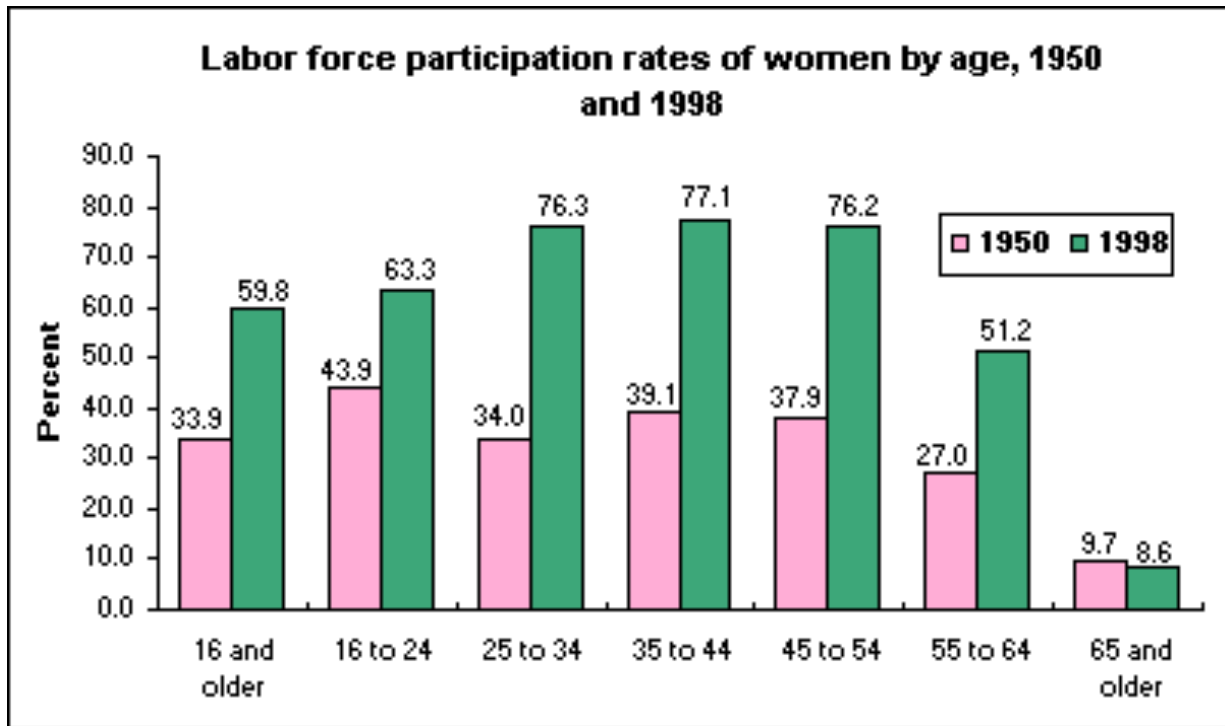
²¹ "David Greenglass, the Brother Who Doomed Ethel Rosenberg, Dies at 92 - The New York Times."

Gender roles in the 1950s were intimately connected to the Cold War. The term nuclear family emerged to describe and encourage the stability of the family as the essential building block of a strong and healthy society. In this view, a woman played a crucial role in waging the Cold War, by keeping the family unit strong and intact. She could do this best, it was thought, by remaining at home to take care of her husband and children, and refusing to pursue a career. Thus was a link forged between traditional gender roles and national security.²²

Clearly, Ethel's continuing to work outside the home after World War II and throughout the beginning of the Cold War could be seen as her going against national security interests as it pertained to women at the time. This allowed the prosecution to make her a figure that was easily demonized when she was accused of committing Soviet espionage, because she was not the image of a perfect housewife. The nuclear family was used as Cold War propaganda, and was juxtaposed to "the horrors of Communism in the lives of Russian women. They were shown dressed in gunnysacks, as they toiled in drab factories while their children were placed in cold, anonymous day care centers".²³ Women who worked were portrayed as negligent mothers, as in the case of Russian mothers who were leaving their children to go to work in factories.

²² "Women in the 1950s," Khan Academy, accessed June 9, 2018, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/postwarera/1950s-america/a/women-in-the-1950s>.

²³ "Mrs. America: Women's Roles in the 1950s | American Experience | PBS," accessed June 9, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pill-mrs-america-womens-roles-1950s/>.



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By 1950, the year the Rosenbergs were arrested, only 34% of women that were Ethel’s age were participating in the labor force. It is also important to consider that female employment began to drop significantly immediately following World War II when the war industry began to slow down, and men returned home to their jobs. Ethel was a minority, participating in the labor force since she graduated from high school. Her job was also a more technical one, when considering what kind of labor women participated in, as it required her to have skills such as typing.

²⁴ “Changes in Women’s Labor Force Participation in the 20th Century : The Economics Daily : U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,” accessed June 9, 2018, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2000/feb/wk3/art03.htm>.

Anti-Semitism:

Finally, the last factor that played a role in the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg is anti-Semitism in the United States during the Twentieth Century. Anti-Semitism as a factor in Julius and Ethel Rosenberg's execution is the main argument made by of many who protested their death sentence, and the government recognized that this was an accusation facing them. This accusation did not stop the government from executing the couple. Although one might think that anti-Semitism played a large part in their case, secondary scholarship shows otherwise. The FBI recognized that opposition to the Rosenberg's trial and execution were accusing the government of being anti-Semitic. Lyman B. Kirkpatrick, the assistant director of the FBI at the time describes this in the following:

For some months the Anti-Defamation League has been alert to an intensive propaganda campaign being promoted by a Communist-inspired group which seeks to create the false impression that Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, convicted atom spies, have been the victims of an alleged anti-Semitic frame up. This campaign has been alanted to agitate Jewish people throughout the US and the world in an effort to gain adherents and thereby give the entire project an appearance of being promoted by Jews as such.²⁵

Many secondary scholarships on anti-Semitism in America during the 20th century actually consider America post World War II to be the beginning of a better existence

²⁵ Lyman Kirkpatrick, "Ethel and Julius Rosenberg Atom Spy Case" (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1952), https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000014710.pdf.

for Jewish Americans. Lucy Dawidowicz, a Jewish historian marks the years 1920 to 1939 as “Decades of Anxiety”, compared to the years 1945 to 1967 as “The Golden Age in America” for American Jews.²⁶

Arthur Goren believes that anti-Semitism began to die out as a norm in America due to the transformations America underwent after the second World War. Goren writes, “Remarkably, the essential features of that transformation--the suburbanization of the Jews, the fashioning of a new communal order, and the emergence of a collective self-confidence and sense of well-being--were already in place by the mid-1950s”.²⁷ It is arguable that the Rosenberg case represents the final remnants of widespread anti-Semitism in the US, as the Rosenbergs did not directly participate in the transformation Goren speaks of. For example, the Rosenbergs never made it to the suburbs, as they were living in Manhattan up until their arrest. They also were somewhat excluded from a “new communal order” as they politically identified as Communists, which isolated them from American capitalist society.

One can compare the Rosenberg’s fate to their Jewish brother-in-law’s and see that this was less likely an anti-Semitic operation taken on by the U.S. government.

Location, communist party membership, and the vulnerable position of Ethel

²⁶ Arthur A Goren, “A ‘Golden Decade’ for American Jews: 1945-1955,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*. Oxford University Press (1992): 294.

²⁷ Goren, 294.

Rosenberg shows much more credibility as why the government pursued execution during the Cold War.

Conclusion

Clearly four factors played a major role in the execution of the Rosenbergs. This includes the Rosenbergs location, their Communist party membership, Ethel's submissive role as a woman in the 1950s, and anti-Semitism in the United States during the twentieth century. Most involved in the same atomic spy ring received prison time, and Ruth was not charged at all, which makes these four points crucial to explain why the Rosenbergs were executed. Their central location made them an easy spotlight for both the government and the media. New York City is the most famous city of the United States, as it is a cultural hub and houses major American institutions. Americans would not be interested in hearing about David Greenglass in Los Alamos, New Mexico. The government could sell the idea that anyone could be a spy much more easily by making a couple from Manhattan the spectacle. Also, the government and major news outlets are all located on the East Coast. Therefore, stories that happen on the East Coast just matter more to the American public. Finally, it was crucial to the American government to protect Los Alamos at all costs due to the top-secret nature of the Manhattan Project at the time. Furthermore, the American government did not want to appear weak, and it looked negligent that the Soviets are able to get spies into one of the most top-secret operations occurring during the Cold War. Nuclear war would become a constant fear for both American and Russians for the rest of the Cold War.

The second major factor that led to the Rosenberg's execution was their Communist party membership from a young age. Both Julius and Ethel do little to hide their membership and party affiliation during the Cold War. At the height of

McCarthyism, Communist party membership would be anyone's downfall, as that made one an obvious suspect, and threat to the state. David Greenglass did not make the same mistake, as he made sure to hide his previous communist party membership, which allowed him to work on the Manhattan project.

The third major factor that played a major role in Ethel Rosenberg's downfall was the fact that she was a woman that knew how to type. Ethel Rosenberg became a victim in the case due to her submissive position as a woman in the early 1950s. This was a period after World War II, when the government was attempting to re-domesticate women and take them out of the labor force, as men had returned home from war. Her ability to type played a major role in the prosecution's attempt to prove her guilty, as her brother accused her of typing of notes for Julius to share with the Soviets.

Finally, the fourth factor that contributed to the Rosenberg's execution was anti-Semitism. While this factor does not play the biggest role in their execution, it does play a role in how the government and the media could demonize Julius and Ethel Rosenberg to the American public. As secondary scholarship noted, anti-Semitism was dying down in the United States, and some argue that it was the beginning of a new era for Jewish people in the United States. The Rosenbergs, however, were not experiencing the same "golden age", as they did not move out to the suburbs and they did not conform to capitalist society as they were ardent Communists up until their death.

Andhil Feinberg describes the Rosenberg's love for Russia in the following:

The pivotal question in the Rosenberg case was and always will be, 'Were this husband and wife so devoted to the Russian government that they

participated in an espionage ring on behalf of that government?' No one has claimed that they acted as spies because of monetary reward, although testimony was introduced to the effect that they received a few things such as a watch. They were fanatics who out of sheer love of Russia, risked and later sacrificed life itself to advance the interests of the Kremlin.²⁸

Clearly Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, were involved in Soviet espionage, due to their devotion to Communism.

The Rosenbergs to this day are still argued to have been guilty by the mainstream media. This is likely because the press was so adamant in their guilt then, and continues to hold their stance now. It made sense for the press to follow the government's lead during such a hysteric time in the United States' history in order to protect themselves. But why would the press continue to do so now? In a *New York Times* article from June 15th, 2003, journalist Sam Roberts contemplated the Rosenbergs' role in history. He writes, "Whatever military and technical secrets Julius delivered to the Russians -- and it now seems all but certain that, as a committed Communist, he did provide information -- the Rosenbergs proved more valuable as martyrs than as spies".²⁹ As Roberts notes, any information actually given to the Soviets was of little value. Ronald Radosh recognized scholars' hesitancy to label the Rosenbergs as definitively guilty or not guilty in the following:

To this day, this received wisdom permeates our educational system. A recent study by historian Larry Schweikart of the University of Dayton has

²⁸ Andhil Fineberg, *The Rosenberg Case: Fact and Fiction*, 28.

²⁹ Sam Roberts, "The Nation: The Rosenbergs, 50 Years Later; Yes, They Were Guilty. But of What Exactly?," *The New York Times*, June 15, 2003, sec. Week In Review, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/15/weekinreview/nation-rosenbergs-50-years-later-yes-they-were-guilty-but-what-exactly.html>.

found that very few college history textbooks say simply that the Rosenbergs were guilty; according to Schweikart, most either state that the couple were innocent or that the trial was 'controversial,' or they "excuse what [the Rosenbergs] did by saying, 'It wasn't that bad. What they provided wasn't important.' Indeed, Columbia University professor Eric Foner once wrote that the Rosenbergs were prosecuted out of a 'determined effort to root out dissent,' part of a broader pattern of 'shattered careers and suppressed civil liberties.' In other words, it was part of the postwar McCarthyite 'witch hunt.'³⁰

While most evidence does point to Julius' guilt, his sentence was much harsher than others involved in the same espionage ring. The death penalty was not necessary as a punishment to the crime, but in the eyes of the American government it was necessary to make an example of what happens to traitors during such a tense and unstable time for the United States in its relationship with Russia. The legitimacy of the their trial and its outcome clearly shows the hysteria that came out of the Cold War paranoia and fear.

Roberts describes the guilt David and Ruth Greenglass had to carry for turning on their own family in the following: "David Greenglass is 81; Ruth Greenglass is 79. They live under a pseudonym because their surname has become synonymous with betrayal of kin and country. 'Perhaps,' Mr. Meeropol says, 'this is David and Ruth's final punishment.'"³¹

³⁰ "Case Closed: The Rosenbergs Were Soviet Spies," accessed June 9, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/la-oe-radosh17-2008sep17-story.html>.

³¹ Roberts, "The Nation."

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