

The Rosenberg Conviction – 65 Years Later (p.s. They Were Guilty)

Sixty-five years ago Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted of espionage for passing secrets to the Soviets before and after the Second World War. They were executed two years later.

It sounds like ancient history, and I'm sure many younger people today have trouble understanding why this particular case took on such great historical significance.

In a sense, the Rosenberg case was the O.J. trial of its day (or Duke lacrosse, Treyvon Martin, etc). The case came to represent something bigger and more important than the charges against the accused. Ideological battle lines were drawn, and people became passionate advocates for or against the accused.

We know now, of course, beyond a shadow of a doubt that Julius Rosenberg was a communist spy and Soviet agent. Morton Sobell, Rosenberg's collaborator who had maintained his innocence for more than half a century, [admitted their guilt](#) nearly a decade ago.

The admission was important because for decades textbooks around America still painted the Rosenbergs as victims. For many years, historians as prominent as Eric Foner of Columbia University (a giant whom I was assigned more than once in grad school) defended them. Foner penned an introduction to a book, written by the children of the Rosenbergs, claiming the prosecution was spawned from "a determined effort to root out dissent."

There has been a failure of the intelligentsia to come to grips with the fact that men like Julius Rosenberg and Alger

Hiss were Soviet agents directly aiding the Kremlin. In 2004, while a graduate student, I recall a professor whom I assisted defending Alger Hiss with great enthusiasm. His own textbook, which he assigned to his students, stated that Hiss was falsely accused by “a liar,” Whitaker Chambers. Bear in mind: this was nearly a decade after the release of [the Venona Cables](#) had led most scholars, the FBI, and the NSA to include that ALES—a codename in the cables—was Alger Hiss.

Historian Ronald Radosh, an adjunct fellow at the Hudson Institute and author of *The Rosenberg File*, has been one of the few historians to set the record straight. He has noted, however, that most historical texts still sidestep the issue of guilt when addressing the Rosenbergs.

Radosh, speaking at the National Archives in the nation’s capital in 2015, [said](#) he suffered professional attacks “for daring to say [the Rosenbergs] were guilty.” A co-panelist, historian John Earl Haynes, [offered](#) an explanation on why the historical record on the communist infiltrations remains murky:

“Let me just follow up on what Ron said about the vehemence of the attacks on him. Those attacks were so vehement in the academy that it is why the historians and researchers who have written scholarly-level books on this case are sitting right here. This is it. We’re it. That’s all there is. Because so many young historians realize that going into this area was a career killer. If you started writing about the subjects of the Rosenberg case, your chances of getting a job at a decent school, or getting tenure, are markedly reduced ... Because in the academy there is a sufficient number [of] hard left historians who would be in a position, sitting on hiring committees, to veto someone who wrote in this area. They are not in a position to hire their own, but in modern American political history there are hundreds of applicants for every position. Vetoing people, blackballing them is easy.”

It's high time the record was set straight. That's why the Rosenberg trial is still important six-and-a-half decades later.

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