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The Spies Who Loved Each Other

Ethel Rosenberg: A Cold War Tragedy

By Anne Sebba

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Seventy years on, the case of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, a nondescript couple from Manhattan's Lower East Side sentenced to death in the electric chair, still holds a horrid fascination. The Rosenberg story has been explored in books, films and on the stage, Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* (1991) being one notable example. 'It was queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs,' begins Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Arthur Miller denied that *The Crucible* was about the Rosenbergs, but the New York theatre-going public made the connection anyway. On the night of their execution, 19 June 1953, the audience stood up and observed a minute's silence after the curtain fell.

The death sentences passed on the Rosenbergs prompted appeals for clemency from around the world, and not just from liberal figures such as Einstein and Sartre; Pope Pius XII, though a virulent anti-communist, appealed unsuccessfully to President Truman to spare their lives, and then again to his successor, President Eisenhower. Their executions provoked revulsion. The judicial murder of Ethel Rosenberg, the mother of two young sons, was especially horrific. She is the only woman to be executed in the USA in modern times for a crime other than murder.

Their trial in 1951 was conducted against a background of Cold War hysteria. People were scared. The American public believed that nuclear war was imminent. There had been surprise and consternation when the Soviet Union had tested its first nuclear weapon in 1949, years earlier than expected; rightly or wrongly, it was thought that this breakthrough had been made possible only by the treacherous disclosure of American technical secrets. The Rosenberg trial was the culmination of a succession of spy scandals; the prosecution alleged that the Rosenbergs had passed the secrets of the atomic bomb to the Russians. 'I consider your crime worse than murder,' the judge

declared before pronouncing sentence. In his view they were responsible not only for the jeopardy in which the American people found themselves, threatened with nuclear attack, but also for the deaths of American soldiers in the Korean War, since the achievement of nuclear parity (it was argued) had emboldened the communist bloc to go on the offensive.

The case presented against the Rosenbergs was weak, against Ethel especially so. The Rosenbergs were communist sympathisers, but then so were many people of their generation and background. Under American law they could not be charged with treason, since at the time of their alleged crimes the United States was not at war with the Soviet Union; indeed they were allies against a common enemy, Nazi Germany. Instead, the Rosenbergs were jointly convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage. Ethel was alleged to have typed up information gathered from various sources by her husband. The case against her relied on evidence from her own brother, David Greenglass, who had admitted spying himself and had made a deal with prosecutors to save his skin and protect his wife.

There was a peculiarly Jewish subplot to the prosecution of the Rosenbergs. Many Americans in the 1950s assumed that Jews were communists. (Jews in the Soviet Union were persecuted for not being communist enough.) As a consequence, many Jews felt the need to prove themselves loyal Americans. The judge at the trial was Jewish, as were the lawyers for both the prosecution and the defence;

orchestrating the whole charade was the loathsome Roy Cohn, later lawyer to Donald Trump. Jewish leaders in America, fearful of a revival of anti-Semitism, avoided asking questions about the overzealous prosecution and never objected to the use of evidence from tainted witnesses or voiced doubts about the judge's apparent bias. Several Jewish cemeteries refused to allow the couple to be buried in their grounds. Five days after her daughter's execution, Ethel's own mother saw fit to call the FBI and denounce her dead daughter as 'a soldier of Stalin'. Far from being supported by their community, the Rosenbergs were on their own.

Left-wing Americans took it for granted that the Rosenbergs had been framed, because the case against them was so flimsy. Comparisons were made with the Dreyfus case of the 1890s, when a French army officer who happened to be a Jew was falsely convicted of treason in an atmosphere of pervasive anti-Semitism. But evidence that has emerged subsequently has made it difficult to maintain Julius's innocence. Whether Ethel was guilty as charged remains unproven. It seems likely that she knew of Julius's spying but may not have actively participated in it. In any case the sentences handed down to both of them were grotesque. The Rosenbergs were not venal. If they were guilty, they were guilty of naivety: an idealistic belief in the promise that communism would bring a better world.

In Anne Sebba, Ethel Rosenberg has found the ideal biographer, sympathetic without being blind to her faults and with a sure understanding of the period. She is not the first to write about Ethel, but she has been able to draw on evidence that has only recently been released, which shows David Greenglass to have been a liar. Sebba depicts Ethel as an intelligent and determined young woman, struggling to make her way against the odds. Her portrayal is compelling. In particular, it is impossible to read her account of Ethel's last days without being moved. She could have saved herself by betraying her husband, but she refused to do so, though it meant taking the heartbreaking decision to abandon her sons to an uncertain future as orphans. Throughout, she showed dignity, resilience and courage: perhaps the one person to emerge from this sorry story with credit.

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