

Hysteria, love and death

Ethel Rosenberg: A Cold War Tragedy

By Anne Sebba
Orion, £20

Reviewed by Kate Saunders

On June 19 1953, a dumpy, sweet-faced Jewish housewife and mother became the first woman in the US to be executed for a crime other than murder. Ethel Rosenberg and her husband, Julius, had been found guilty of spying for the Soviet Union, at the height of Cold War hysteria. She was 37, mother of two small boys, and her execution in the electric chair was widely condemned across the world. But did she deserve that sentence?

Anne Sebba's brilliant, unforgettable biography is the story of a woman who fell victim to a fatal cocktail of prejudices – anti-Communism, antisemitism and misogyny. She was three years older than her husband, and therefore assumed to be the “dominant” partner in the marriage. Her own family threw her on the bonfire to protect her gormless younger brother. This book sets out to explain her motivation, and is so convincing that the reader is left reeling at the injustice of her death.

“Ethel Rosenberg was not, I believe, a spy. Nor was she a saint,” writes Sebba. Though Julius was “undoubtedly” guilty of passing secrets to the Soviets, Ethel seems to have been doomed by her unshakable loyalty to her husband, and her own desire to be “morally correct,

on the right side of history.” Sebba deals briskly with the fact that history has moved on, and the earnest people who supported Stalin's USSR now look almost ridiculously wrong-headed. She reminds us that in the 1930s and '40s, Soviet Communism “still seemed miraculous

to many self-styled ‘progressives’ in the West because of the totalitarian efficiency of Stalin's propaganda machine, and the naivety and wishful thinking of a gallery of dupes.” Ethel and Julius were among those “dupes” who believed



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they were supporting the underdog and generally working towards a brave new world of equality.

Ethel knew about poverty, growing up in New York's Lower East Side, and she drank injustice with her mother's milk – if there is a villain in this story, it is Ethel's mother, Tessie Greenglass, described, understandably,

by Ethel as a “witch”. Ethel Greenglass was born in 1915 and, seven years later, Tessie gave birth to David, whom she worshipped to a degree unreasonable even for a stereotypical, boy-favouring Jewish mother. But, to her ambitious daughter, she remained tyrannical and resentful.

Ethel was highly intelligent, and a talented singer who dreamt of a career in opera (one of the most moving passages in this deeply moving book describes her singing requests in prison for her fellow-inmates). Without a scintilla of

parental support, Ethel bought a piano and taught herself to play. This young woman was entirely self-made, and that included her political opinions. In 1936, she met Julius Rosenberg and, in 1939, they were married at the Lower East Side Synagogue.

At this point, Ethel seems to have buried her singing dreams and turned all her attention to political activism and to Julius. “She had hitched her star increasingly to this man,” Sebba writes. When her sons Michael and Robby were born, in 1943 and 1946. Ethel transferred

most of her passion and energy to the challenge of motherhood. Sebba emphasises Ethel's intense and overwhelming love for her sons, and the parts of the book that deal with Michael and Robby are agonising to read.

Julius Rosenberg and David Greenglass definitely did pass information to the Soviets, but David survived by turning against his sister. Sebba takes the view that Ethel was doomed by his betrayal, by her loyalty to Julius, and by her steely refusal to give the US authorities any more names. By the time I closed this superbly written book, I was thoroughly convinced that Ethel was the victim of a scandalous miscarriage of justice. No matter what motivated Julius or David, Anne Sebba makes it clear that Ethel was motivated by love. One of the prison guards reportedly told Julius he was the luckiest man in the world, “because no man ever had a woman who loved him that much.”

Kate Saunders is a prize-winning writer and critic



