

The National and International Responses to the Trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg

Mallory Hogan

Professor Keppel

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"What is there about this case that has aroused the world?... What is it that prompts fifteen members of the Israeli Government to cable to me a protest of your sentence? What is it that has caused France to burn with indignation at the case?"<sup>1</sup> This was the question that Emmanuel Hirsch Bloch, the attorney to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, posed to the court on December 30, 1952.<sup>2</sup> In this one of many appeals to save his clients from the electric chair, Bloch implied that Judge Irving Kaufman's failure to revoke the death sentence could result in a national and international backlash against the U.S.<sup>3</sup> Judge Kaufman was unwilling to concede to any pressure from the U.S. public, or the public of any other country for that matter, stating that, "When the day comes when we succumb to the pressure we might as well close the doors of justice."<sup>4</sup> In the end, Judge Kaufman ruled to maintain the Rosenbergs' death sentence.

This appeal took place after the Rosenbergs had spent over two years either in court or in New York's Sing Sing Prison. The case of the Rosenbergs (as well as the events surrounding it) remains to be an intriguing but harrowing look at the state of U.S. justice during the Cold War. Accused of recruiting his brother-in-law David Greenglass to spy for the Soviet Union, Julius Rosenberg was arrested in July of 1950.<sup>5</sup> Ethel Rosenberg was later charged that August with conspiring to commit espionage and was arrested as well.<sup>6</sup> In March of 1951, after weeks of giving testimony and maintaining their innocence, the couple was found guilty under Judge Kaufman, who sentenced them

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<sup>1</sup> "Decision Reserved in Rosenberg Case," *The New York Times*, December 31, 1952.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Meeropol and Michael Meeropol, *We Are Your Sons*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1975), xxix.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

to death a month later.<sup>7</sup> The Rosenbergs were taken to Sing Sing Prison, where they were kept for the next two years as numerous court appeals and outside pleas for clemency failed.<sup>8</sup> On June 19, 1953, the Rosenbergs' death sentence was carried out, and the United States (as well as the rest of the world) was left to consider the implications and lasting effects of this event.<sup>9</sup>

Initially, the Rosenbergs' plight was something that only seemed to interest the media in the U.S. Once the trial began in March 1951, the press was eager to showcase "what was undoubtedly the best publicized spy hunt of all time."<sup>10</sup> But the press did more than simply report on the ongoing trial; there is some evidence to suggest that the media was, in some ways, an active participant in the trial. Virginia Carmichael claimed in her book *Framing History: The Rosenberg Story and the Cold War* that prosecutor Myles Lane as good as convicted Ethel Rosenberg when he stated during a news conference that her actions may have been a contributing factor to the war in Korea.<sup>11</sup> To make such a statement to the press was later considered to be a violation of the Sixth Amendment, but this decision was made two years after the fact.<sup>12</sup> For Ethel, the damage was already done. Lane's words and other instances of prosecutors in the case using the media to purport foregone conclusions may have helped make the jury's guilty verdict even more of an inevitability.<sup>13</sup> Bloch brought up the role of the press in the trial during one of his appeals against the Rosenbergs' death sentence, as a December article in the *New York*

*Times* reported:

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, xxx.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> *We Are Your Sons*, xxxii.

<sup>10</sup> *The Rosenberg File*, 170.

<sup>11</sup> Virginia Carmichael, *Framing History: The Rosenberg Story and the Cold War*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 89.

<sup>12</sup> *Framing History*, 89.

<sup>13</sup> *Framing History*, 91.

Mr. Bloch said that a 'virulent atmosphere' had pervaded the courtroom during the Rosenberg trial. He charged that much of this atmosphere resulted from inflammatory material furnished to the press by J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Irving H. Saypol, then the United States Attorney.<sup>14</sup>

Bloch was likely referring to the media's manipulation of Hoover's press releases regarding the Rosenbergs' arrests,<sup>15</sup> as well as Saypol's selective reports to news journalists.<sup>16</sup> Both men were also involved in feeding the story of the arrest of William Perl, a former member of the communist party who was charged with perjury, to the media in a way that would further their own personal goals while also slanting the case against the Rosenbergs.<sup>17</sup> The defendants thus argued that the press had made them "victims of pretrial and during-trial newspaper publicity in the New York City area."<sup>18</sup> Since the Rosenbergs' jury was not sequestered,<sup>19</sup> the media could easily play a part in influencing their verdict and, ultimately, the outcome of the trial. Even so, Judge Kaufman chose to forego Bloch's request for a new trial.<sup>20</sup>

Not all press coverage of the trial was slanted against the accused's favor, however. Prior to her arrest, the *Los Angeles Times* featured an article that presented Ethel as a caring wife and mother who was simply concerned with seeing that her husband and brother's innocence was proven in court.<sup>21</sup> A month later, the *New York Times* reported on Ethel's arrest with in an interesting take on the event. The article described Ethel first and foremost as a "mother of two small children," and pointed out

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<sup>14</sup> "Decision Reserved in Rosenberg Case," *The New York Times*, December 31, 1952.

<sup>15</sup> *Framing History*, 88.

<sup>16</sup> *The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War*, 37.

<sup>17</sup> *Framing History*, 90.

<sup>18</sup> *The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War*, 82.

<sup>19</sup> *Framing History*, 41.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

<sup>21</sup> "Family Link in Alleged U.S. Spy Ring Disclosed: Housewife Broods Over Fate of Husband and Brother Facing Trial for Espionage," *The Los Angeles Times*, June 19, 1950.

the woman's short stature and light weight,<sup>22</sup> almost as if to imply surprise that such a small and apparently delicate person could be involved in a Soviet spy ring. Whatever Myles Lane's intentions were when he blamed the Rosenbergs for the Korean War, his statement did not turn the press against the couple completely. Reporters seemed to be more interested in constructing a story that would grab an audience, complete with interesting characters and surprising turns, than they were with making their own judgments. *That* kind of reporting would come later in response to international criticism to the case. As the U.S. media presented the story of the trial to the people, it also began to pick up on the growing public response to the case throughout the country, especially in the days following the couple's death sentence. Pleas for clemency gradually became louder and louder in the U.S.

One response to the trial was the establishment of the National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case (NCSJRC), founded a few months after the couple's sentencing in April of 1951.<sup>23</sup> The organization took up donations for a retrial and sought to create a grassroots movement on the Rosenbergs' behalf, something that was apparently somewhat successful, as other committees protesting the Rosenbergs' sentence spread throughout the country.<sup>24</sup> In December of 1952, the committee held a vigil in front of the White House and planned to continue the ceremony until the couple received either "executive clemency" or their execution, the latter of which was slated for the week of the January twelfth at the time.<sup>25</sup> Demonstrations reached to New York as well, as that same month, an issue of the *Los Angeles Times* featured an article about a

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<sup>22</sup> "Plot to Have G.I. Give Bomb Data To Soviet Is Laid to His Sister Here," *The New York Times*, August 12, 1950.

<sup>23</sup> *We Are Your Sons*, xxx.

<sup>24</sup> *The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War*, 66.

<sup>25</sup> "White House Picketed by Rosenberg Group," *The Washington Post*, December 29, 1952.

protest near Sing Sing Prison, where the Rosenbergs were being kept as they awaited their execution.<sup>26</sup> The demonstration, which reportedly consisted of over seven hundred people, marched near the prison and hosted a few speakers on the couple's behalf.<sup>27</sup> One protester explained the demonstration's opinion on the Rosenbergs' death sentence: "I want to particularly impress that the security of the American people does not demand the death of the Rosenbergs. Their condemnation to death is an act of terror."<sup>28</sup> Public protest apparently had some effect on the case, since the Supreme Court and President Eisenhower did review petitions that were made on behalf of the Rosenbergs; however, the petitions ultimately only bought the couple a few more months. The execution date was moved from January to March, then finally to the week of June 15.<sup>29</sup>

Requests for clemency continued into the Rosenbergs' final months. In June of 1953, only days before the couple's execution, the Los Angeles Rosenberg Committee held a protest against the death sentence, though attendance at the event reportedly dwindled as time went on.<sup>30</sup> Another plea was a letter from the Rosenbergs' ten-year-old son Michael to President Eisenhower.<sup>31</sup> The letter was reprinted in full in the *Los Angeles Times*, after being made available to the public by the NCSJRC.<sup>32</sup> The publishing of Michael Rosenberg's letter in the newspaper is one example of the U.S. media sympathizing with the young family's plight, or at least wanting to show both sides of the developing story, something that could also be said for numerous newspapers' disclosing

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<sup>26</sup> "Demonstration for Atom Spies Curbed" *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 1952.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *We Are Your Sons*, xxxi.

<sup>30</sup> "Ruling on Rosenberg Stay Today," *Los Angeles Times*, June 17, 1953.

<sup>31</sup> "Rosenberg Son, 10, Asks Clemency of Eisenhower," *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 1953.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

of Ethel Rosenberg's letter to the president.<sup>33</sup> The release of these letters to the public was apparently done with the couple's consent, as they had hoped that their messages would be seen sympathetically by the outside world and could perhaps even save them from their sentence.<sup>34</sup> As the Rosenbergs' execution date drew still nearer, the case garnered more and more pleas for mercy. Gradually, the U.S. media began to pick up on the rest of the world's response to the ongoing trial.

In December 1952, the *New York Times* reported that around two hundred letters from numerous countries, as near as England and as far as Australia, were being sent to the U.S., supporting the Rosenbergs in their request for a reconsideration of their sentence.<sup>35</sup> The letters' senders included "scientists, clergymen, educators and union officials."<sup>36</sup> In January of 1953, six months before the condemned couple was scheduled to be executed, the *Times* ran a story on a rally in East Berlin, in which "several thousand persons" gathered with prominent speakers and members of the clergy to protest the Rosenbergs' death sentence.<sup>37</sup> The article also said that the "head of the Christian Democratic Union in East Germany" had requested the pope's help in the matter.<sup>38</sup> This request was only one of many appeals sent to the pope on the Rosenbergs' behalf, as the following month, the *Los Angeles Times* printed an article that said Pope Pius XII had informed the White House that he had received numerous pleas for the U.S. government to spare Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.<sup>39</sup> The reporter made a point to stress that the pope himself had not requested anything of President Eisenhower, but only that the Vatican

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<sup>33</sup> "Letter by Mrs. Rosenberg to the President," *The New York Times*, June 20, 1953.

<sup>34</sup> *We Are Your Sons*, xxii.

<sup>35</sup> "200 Letter Back Rosenberg Appeal," *The New York Times*, December 30, 1952.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> "Rally in East Berlin," *The New York Times*, January 7, 1953.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> "Pope Sends New Note on Atom Spies," *Los Angeles Times*, February 15, 1953.

had apparently received so many appeals for the Rosenbergs that it felt compelled to inform the U.S.<sup>40</sup> The *Chicago Daily Tribune* ran a story on the letters as well, saying that the pope had acted “out of the motives of charity... without being able to enter into the merits of the cases.”<sup>41</sup> As the Rosenbergs’ execution neared, other countries’ efforts to save the couple seemed to become more and more desperate and impractical, as the *Los Angeles Times* reported:

As agitation over the case increased abroad, the Polish Communist government announced it has offered political asylum to the Rosenbergs if this country will free them. The State Department promptly denounced the offer as an ‘impertinence.’<sup>42</sup>

But by June 19, 1953, no amount of international outrage or protest had managed to secure a pardon for the couple, and the two were executed that night.<sup>43</sup>

An article from the *New York Times*, published only a week after the execution of the couple, reported on an averted protest of the sentence in the House of Commons in London.<sup>44</sup> The *Times* quoted Steven Davies, a member of the Labor Party, as saying that he (and his fellow protesters) wanted the U.S. Embassy in England closed and all remaining U.S. troops in the country gone.<sup>45</sup> The article went on to say that the head of the Labor Party dismissed Davies’ demands and said that such views had “no support on this side of the House.”<sup>46</sup> The case had apparently ignited a furor among people in England, though it did not gain state support (as the article quoted also mentioned that neither the Conservative nor Labor Party would want to “jeopardize Anglo-American

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> “Pope in New Message Calls Ike’s Attention to A-Spies,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 15, 1953.

<sup>42</sup> “Ruling on Rosenberg Stay Today.”

<sup>43</sup> “‘Murder’ Charged in Rosenberg Case,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 1953.

<sup>44</sup> “Rosenberg Protest Spurned in Commons,” *The New York Times*, June 26, 1953.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.



relations,")<sup>47</sup> The United Kingdom's newspaper *The Manchester Guardian* reported on the Rosenbergs' funeral, making a note of Bloch's eulogy to the couple in which he referred to President Eisenhower as "a military dictator garbed in civilian attire," and said that his clients were victims of "cold, deliberate murder" sponsored by the state.<sup>48</sup> In United Kingdom, the Rosenberg case was one of growing public scrutiny, and this inquiry spread to France as well.

On June 17, 1953, only two days before the Rosenbergs were executed, Harold Callender of the *New York Times* published a piece saying that the U.S. Embassy in Paris was nearly overwhelmed with protesters and opposition to the couple's death sentence.<sup>49</sup> Callender commented on the matter:

It reflects a revulsion against the death sentence for espionage in peace time, disturb [sic] of justice in the United States and a desire to show that United States officials have been led into error by an unduly passionate pursuit of the "cold war."<sup>50</sup>

Those challenging the Rosenbergs' sentence included Roman Catholic Archbishop of Paris, the speaker of the France's National Assembly, and many notable French writers.<sup>51</sup> The presence of such a variety of people, Callender purported, showed that the opposition to the Rosenbergs' sentence consisted of far more people than Communist sympathizers, and that the matter was therefore much greater than drawing a line between true patriots anti-American people.<sup>52</sup> The reporter did admit, however, that it should be noted that so many protests may have been more interested in just criticizing the U.S. itself, but that this possibility did not dismiss the legitimacy of the people's questions: "This concern

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, xxx.

<sup>48</sup> "America Under a Dictator," *The Manchester Guardian*, June 22, 1953.

<sup>49</sup> Harold Callender, "French Pleas on Rosenbergs Laid to Mercy and Politics," *The New York Times*, June 17, 1953.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

and doubt have been badly expressed and have appeared in odd company. But they are no less real for that.”<sup>53</sup>

The U.S. made some efforts to combat international protests, as in January 1953, the U.S. embassy in Paris released statements to forty European countries that explained the U.S.’s side of the Rosenberg case.<sup>54</sup> French newspapers widely reported on the statement,<sup>55</sup> and while the information did manage to convince some people of the couple’s guilt, many still maintained that the Rosenbergs should not have received a death sentence.<sup>56</sup> The growing protests in France apparently made quite an impression on the U.S. ambassador to the other country, as he had reportedly warned President Eisenhower that going through with the Rosenbergs’ execution could "outrage all France and do America irreparable harm abroad," and that it could "play into the Reds' hands by making martyrs" of the couple.<sup>57</sup> The couple’s case had gripped France with a furor, as the same article reported that the “walls of the capital [were] plastered with pictures of the Rosenbergs and their children.”<sup>58</sup> The ambassador had also been warned that “the execution of the Rosenbergs will give French Communists the best anti-American weapon imaginable.”<sup>59</sup> President Truman was told something similar before he left office in 1953, and was advised to give the couple life imprisonment instead,<sup>60</sup> but he did not heed this advice. Now that the U.S. embassy in Paris was being bombarded about the Rosenberg case more than ever, it was becoming more and more apparent that the couple’s execution could mean an international backlash. What’s more, the ambassador’s

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> “Court Points Rosenbergs' Way to Stay,” *The Washington Post*, January 6, 1953.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> *The Rosenberg File*, 374.

<sup>57</sup> “Spare A-Spies, U.S. Envoy in Paris Asks Ike,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 12, 1953.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> John F. Neville, *The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers), 97.

warning to President Eisenhower about the Rosenbergs eventually being used as tools for communist propaganda would eventually prove to be true.

The French press had been badgering the U.S. embassy for information on the Rosenberg case since 1952.<sup>61</sup> Initially, the case only received attention from communist and leftist newspapers,<sup>62</sup> but when the court decided to maintain the couple's death sentence in October of that year,<sup>63</sup> more of the French press began to pick up on the story, analyzing the trial and questioning the justice of the verdict.<sup>64</sup> Howard Fast, a well-known American communist, had visited France earlier that year and spoken with the French Communist Party about the Rosenberg case,<sup>65</sup> and had also written in an article in the French communist newspaper *L'Humanite* about the trial.<sup>66</sup> Both actions sparked interest in the case abroad, and the French press began to demand clemency for the Rosenbergs, with at least one paper saying that the couple was innocent, and some claiming the death sentence was a sign of the U.S.'s increasing paranoia.<sup>67</sup> This was an idea that seemed to echo throughout Europe, as "war hysteria" was another allegation made against the court in its ruling of the Rosenbergs' case. The *Los Angeles Times* reported on some activity in the Soviet press, where this charge was being brought up: "Soviet newspapers, directing their attention for the first time to the case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, said today the 'progressive public of the United States and the entire world' considers them 'the victims of the war hysteria.'"<sup>68</sup> In November 1952, the *New York Times* reported that "twenty prominent rabbis and religious leaders in Jerusalem"

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<sup>61</sup> *The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War*, 80.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *We Are Your Sons*, xxxi.

<sup>64</sup> *The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War*, 80.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>66</sup> *The Rosenberg File*, 350.

<sup>67</sup> *The Press, The Rosenbergs, and the Cold War*, 81.

<sup>68</sup> "Ruling on Rosenberg Stay Today," *The Los Angeles Times*, June 17, 1953.

had petitioned for President Truman to spare the Rosenbergs of the death sentence, saying that it was not right for the couple to be put to death for espionage charges during a time of peace.<sup>69</sup> The Rosenbergs' execution was increasingly seen as a rash and unnecessary punishment, as well as a sign that perhaps the U.S. was in danger of sinking into fascism.<sup>70</sup>

While it could be fairly argued that other countries' protests to the Rosenberg trial was at least partly out of a desire to criticize the U.S.,<sup>71</sup> there is another factor that one should consider when comparing the press coverage of the case in the U.S. and abroad. In December 1952, eleven members of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party were hanged in Prague after being tried as guilty of treason in a series of show trials.<sup>72</sup> Those executed included Rudolf Slansky, a leader of the Party, and his trial and conviction was a point of contention among communists abroad.<sup>73</sup> The Prague trials drew (accurate) accusations of anti-Semitism, as eight of the eleven Party members executed were Jewish and were specifically charged with conspiring Zionist plots against the state.<sup>74</sup> The allegations of anti-Semitism were in sharp contrast to what western communists wanted to promote in their movement, especially in the aftermath of World War II, but the executions in Prague stood as an ugly contradiction to these ideals for the world to see.<sup>75</sup> So when news of the court's decision to forgo an appeal on the Rosenberg case hit Europe, the potential diversion from the events in Prague was perhaps too good to pass up.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> "Jerusalem Sends a Rosenberg Plea," *The New York Times*, November 19, 1952.

<sup>70</sup> *The Rosenberg File*, 350.

<sup>71</sup> *The Rosenberg File*, 350.

<sup>72</sup> *The Rosenberg File*, 348.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

In the aftermath of the Prague trials, the French communist press swept up the Rosenberg story with enthusiasm. After the Slansky trial had reached its verdict but before the executions were carried out, *L'Humanite* compared the sentence to that of the Rosenbergs: "The condemnation to death of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg is exactly the opposite of the condemnation of Slansky. The former is a crime. The latter is action taken against criminals."<sup>77</sup> The author of the *L'Humanite* article reaffirmed that at least some communists of western Europe would side with the Soviet Union's brand of justice, and use the Rosenbergs' sentence as a diversion from this obviously problematic stance. This tactic did not go unnoticed by the foreign press, as Alistair Cook of the United Kingdom's *Manchester Guardian* wrote a month after the executions in Prague, "'What about the Rosenbergs?' is the parrot-cry of every Communist who is challenged with the recent evidence of anti-Zionism in Soviet policy."<sup>78</sup> Reporters in the U.S. caught on to the propaganda game as well, as one *Washington Post* article showed:

Plainly... the antisemitic [sic] propaganda is not intended for export to the West... as is shown in the frantic efforts of the party to counteract the effect of the Prague trials on British and American Jews. This, apparently, is not so much from fear of further defections of Jewish comrades from the party, as because the antisemitic [sic] propaganda collides in a most embarrassing manner with the propaganda campaign now being waged in behalf of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.<sup>79</sup>

A month later, the *Post* continued to criticize the use of the Rosenberg trial in communist press:

[An] editorial writer told his readers that Communist measures against Jews actually are defensive steps to fight "American Zionists who seek to undermine socialism..." Today's article said the Soviet and East German constitutions specifically forbid "racial hatred" and declared the American conviction and death

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<sup>77</sup> "SAUCE FOR THE GOOSE?: Rosenberg Appeal and Slansky," *The Manchester Guardian*, November 30, 1952.

<sup>78</sup> Alistair Cook, "The Rosenbergs: Motives of Communist Agitation," *The Manchester Guardian*, January 15, 1953.

<sup>79</sup> "Communist Antisemitism." *The Washington Post*. January 17, 1953.

sentence against atomic spies Ethel and Julius Rosenberg was “racial hatred.” The Prague execution of eight Jewish Communist leaders last December, on the other hand, was described as the people “protecting themselves from Zionist and Israel mechinations [sic].”<sup>80</sup>

These accusations were certainly not far off, as one newspaper quoted the French Communist Party leader Jacques Duclos as saying that “all those who accuse the Soviet Union of anti-Semitism should watch their words... We Communists defend Ethel and Julius Rosenberg – and they are Jews.”<sup>81</sup> The two cases were being played against each other in strange, round-about effort to present the capitalist U.S. or the communist Soviet Union as less barbaric than the other. The Prague trials, along with Stalin’s other purges of Jews in the national communist parties throughout Europe,<sup>82</sup> were a timely counter to the Rosenberg trial in an odd sort of international propaganda war. These propaganda battles did not go unnoticed by the various movements to save the Rosenbergs, either, and the leaders of the movements had quite a task of trying to keep the press war from derailing their goal.<sup>83</sup> The NCSJR already had to deal with accusations of the movement being a communist ploy, and numerous press confrontations about the Prague trials did nothing to discourage such allegations.<sup>84</sup>

To say that the Rosenberg and Prague trials were instruments in an international argument over which side was more anti-Semitic is not to say that all of these allegations came from a place seeking to manipulate the public. As the discussion of anti-Semitism in the Rosenberg case continued abroad, particularly in France, some drew comparisons between the case and the Dreyfus Affair, referring to the case of Alfred Dreyfus, a French

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<sup>80</sup> “East Germans Again Narrow Blast at Jews,” *The Washington Post*, February 16, 1953.

<sup>81</sup> “12,000 at Paris Rally,” *The New York Times*, February 18, 1953.

<sup>82</sup> *The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War*, 102.

<sup>83</sup> *The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War*, 85.

<sup>84</sup> *The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War*, 86.

Jewish military officer who was charged with treason in 1864.<sup>85</sup> Dreyfus was completely innocent of the charges and the “evidence” against him was incredibly weak, but his case had been continually fueled by the anti-Semitism that was rampant in France at the time, and he was eventually given a life sentence to the notorious prison at Devil’s Island.<sup>86</sup> Though Dreyfus was later fully exonerated and freed from prison in 1906, and even went on to serve the French military in World War I,<sup>87</sup> the case stood as a testament to the hysteria and danger of anti-Semitism, one that remained fresh in the French public’s memory when the country turned its attention to the Rosenbergs’ plight. The supposed parallels between the two cases was further purported by William Reuben, who ran a series on the Rosenberg trial that was featured in the American communist newspaper *The Guardian*.<sup>88</sup> Reuben’s articles on the Rosenbergs followed a similar pattern to that of Emile Zola’s famous 1898 *J’accuse* letter to the French president, in which Zola called out all the participants in the trial who were responsible for wrongfully sending Dreyfus to Devil’s Island.<sup>89</sup> Reuben’s series implied that the Rosenberg case was a government frame-up, as well as an effort to eradicate Americans with “left-wing backgrounds” without having to respect their rights.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, the Rosenbergs’ attorney, Bloch, said that French League of the Rights of Man, which was originally founded to defend Dreyfus, was one of the many voices speaking out against his clients’ condemnation.<sup>91</sup> It seemed that—to many people in France—the Rosenbergs’ case hit rather close to their own

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<sup>85</sup> Steven Lubert, “Why the Dreyfus Affair Does and Doesn’t Matter,” review of *Why the Dreyfus Affair Matters*, by Louis Begley, Greenbag Journal. [http://www.greenbag.org/v13n3/v13n3\\_review\\_lubet.pdf](http://www.greenbag.org/v13n3/v13n3_review_lubet.pdf).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> *The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War*, 58.

<sup>89</sup> Eric Cahm, *The Dreyfus Affair in French Society and Politics* (New York: Longman Publishing, 1996), 64.

<sup>90</sup> *The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War*, 60.

<sup>91</sup> “Decision Reserved in Rosenberg Case.”

country's history, and such a gross miscarriage of justice could not be allowed to happen again.<sup>92</sup>

Back in the U.S., however, charges of anti-Semitism in the Rosenberg case did not go over quite as well. Julius Klein, described as the former “commander of the Jewish War veterans” in a December 1952 piece from the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, slammed claims of anti-Semitism as “red trickery,” that it was all simple deception and emotional manipulation that could be expected of communists, and that the communists’ failure to call out the anti-Jewish motivations behind the Prague trials was proof of this.<sup>93</sup> Klein also purported that the Rosenbergs could not truly be considered Jews “because Judaism is as incompatible with communism as any other religion.”<sup>94</sup> Another member of the veterans group later sent Judge Kaufman a telegram in which he noted his approval of the decision, and also commented on what he saw as the manipulation of the Rosenbergs’ faith: “We despise equally those who would callously use the Rosenbergs to injure the Jews and those who would callously use the Jews to help the Rosenbergs. No American can tolerate either.”<sup>95</sup>

Lucy Dawidowicz, the late Jewish historian, condemned claims of anti-Semitism as well, reiterating Klein’s sentiment that the accusations were means of “moral blackmail” at the hands of Communists, and that Jewish Americans should therefore distance themselves from any movement advocating or fighting for the Rosenbergs’ release, such as the NCSJRC.<sup>96</sup> Robert and Michael Meeropol, the Rosenbergs’ sons (who were later adopted by Abel and Anne Meeropol, hence the change in name), saw

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<sup>92</sup> *The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War*, 81.

<sup>93</sup> “Klein Condemns ‘Red Trickery’ to Save 2 Spies,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 20, 1952.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> “Clemency Ban Assailed by Atomic Spies,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 4, 1953.

<sup>96</sup> *The Rosenberg File*, 353.



anti-Semitism as a non-issue as well in their book *We Are Your Sons*, in which they quote one of their father's letters on the matter: "Oliver 'Pontius' Pilat, New York *Post* reporter planted the germ. He mad the accusation and tried to establish his lie, prima facie, as a fact, that we claim we were convicted because we were Jews and because of anti-Semitism."<sup>97</sup> Such accusations, Julius wrote, were crafted by the media to further villainize himself and his wife.<sup>98</sup> He believed that others may have been truly convinced of the charges of anti-Semitism, but such convictions were more in response to the threat of possible violence against Jews in wake of the trial.<sup>99</sup> In other words, Julius Rosenberg seemed to believe that American Jews were concerned about any possible future hate crimes committed against them in "retaliation" to his and his wife's alleged crimes.

Even after the Rosenbergs' sentence was carried out, discussion of anti-Semitism and war hysteria's possible roles in the case continued on the international level. Over a month after the Rosenbergs' execution, the *New York Times* ran another story on how the U.S. representatives to the World Jewish Congress had disagreed with another organization member's assertion that the case had been an act of anti-Semitism.<sup>100</sup> More specifically, there had been accusations that the case was sparking anti-Semitism in the U.S., to which representatives Louis Segal and Dr. Maurice L. Perlzweig responded that such claims were unfounded, and that the Rosenberg case was not relevant to Jewish interests at all.<sup>101</sup> This view coincided with those of most main-stream Jewish organizations (such as the American Jewish Committee) in the U.S., as well as those of

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<sup>97</sup> *We Are Your Sons*, 164.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> "Rosenberg Bid Fails at Jewish Congress," *The New York Times*, August 7, 1953.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

the American Civil Liberties Union.<sup>102</sup> Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton's *The Rosenberg File* goes as far to imply that these organizations' denunciations of charges of anti-Semitism, while fairly sound, were likely due in part to wanting to stay in the U.S. government's good books, or rather, "disassociate themselves from any taint of Red."<sup>103</sup> Klein's earlier assertion that Judaism was as incompatible with communism as any other faith was perhaps partly intended to accomplish the same thing.

Nearly a week after the executions, the *New York Times* reported that the Communist Party had released a statement that charged the U.S. with murder, that the Rosenbergs' sentence was "an act of Fascist violence," and that it was a sign of the "Hitlerization of America."<sup>104</sup> The Polish newspaper *Trybuna Ludu* echoed this sentiment, referring to the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigations as "the American gestapo."<sup>105</sup> Another demonstration was held at the U.S. embassy in Israel, while elsewhere in the country, protesters decried "American fascists."<sup>106</sup> Not all foreign press was lambasting the U.S. however, as at least one Italian newspaper purported that "if American spies against Russia were involved the Communists would have put an end to them without so much ceremony," referring to the Rosenbergs' two years worth of appeals.<sup>107</sup> It seemed as though the Rosenberg case would remain a point of contention between the U.S. and the rest of the world for years to come.

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<sup>102</sup> *The Rosenberg File*, 352.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> "'Murder' Charged in Rosenberg Case."

<sup>105</sup> "A-Spies Killed by 'FBI Thugs,' Says Red Press," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 21, 1953.

<sup>106</sup> "Crowds Gather in Israel," *The New York Times*, June 21, 1953.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

Discussion of the press war between the U.S. and communists abroad continued as well into the mid 1950s, coinciding with the time of junior Senator Joseph McCarthy and his notorious communist witch hunts:

The committee [on Un-American Activities] notes that “in virtually every area the Rosenberg campaign was initiated and conducted by members of the Communist Part.” ...Our U.S. Information centers... had almost nothing with which to counter the mass of Communist propaganda... The result was that we suffered considerable damage to our prestige abroad, while at home the Communists had a field day in their customary task of sowing seeds of dissension...”<sup>108</sup>

The Committee on Un-American Activities criticized the U.S.’s apparent lack of sufficient response to the onslaught of anti-American propaganda, and seemed to consider the affair a communist victory even though the Rosenbergs were executed in the end. The Rosenbergs were being projected as martyrs, just as the U.S. ambassador had warned President Eisenhower and others had warned Truman. Along with other countries’ concern that the U.S. was becoming warped by paranoia and the newly dubbed “McCarthyism,” some people may have seen the execution as a sign of future hostilities between the United States and the Soviet Union, as an article in the *Manchester Guardian* said that “the decision to carry out the death sentence seemed to imply a conviction on the part of the American Government that the cold war must irremediably become a hot one.”<sup>109</sup> Abroad, the case and subsequent execution continued to draw criticism in the following years, as in 1954, the *New York Times* reported on a conference was held in Vienna, Austria, during which lawyers from numerous European countries had apparently discussed plans to create an “international tribunal for the holding of a Rosenberg counter-trial.”<sup>110</sup> Those who sponsored the conference included Emmanuel

<sup>108</sup> “Red Propaganda for Atom Spies.” *The Los Angeles Times*. August 30, 1956.

<sup>109</sup> “French United by Rosenberg Case,” *The Manchester Guardian*, June 22, 1953.

<sup>110</sup> Will Lissner, “Reds Aim to ‘Try’ Rosenbergs Again,” *The New York Times*. January 7, 1954.

Bloch.<sup>111</sup> One American lawyer speculated that the conference had been held as “counter-propaganda” to the recent international news of legal rights violations in communist countries.<sup>112</sup> This article was printed in 1954, nearly half a year after the Rosenbergs’ execution, showing that the international discussion of the case would continue for some time. Going by the American lawyer’s assessment, the Rosenbergs would also continue to be used as tools in an ongoing international propaganda game. Both of the Rosenbergs likely foresaw this, as Julius wrote in his last letter from Sing Sing, “Ethel wants it known that we are the first victims of American fascism.”<sup>113</sup>

The questions of the couple’s innocence and whether the trial had been properly handled came back into the public’s consciousness rather recently, as in 2008, their friend and accused co-conspirator Morton Sobell admitted to the charges against him and said that Julius was also involved.<sup>114</sup> Ethel, according to Sobell, was only distantly involved, and was truly only implicated along with Julius because she was his wife.<sup>115</sup> The 1995 release of the Venona documents, the result of the U.S. Army Signal Security Agency’s fifty year project to decrypt thousands of telegrams transmitted to and from Soviets in the U.S., incriminated Julius as well.<sup>116</sup> Ethel’s role in the entire affair remains less certain. Sobell’s statement about the true reasons for Ethel’s arrest are at least partly accurate, as the prosecutors had hoped that threatening her with a death sentence would eventually pressure Julius to confess.<sup>117</sup> At the very least, Ethel likely knew of her husband’s work

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> *The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War*, 139.

<sup>114</sup> Sam Roberts, “Figure in Rosenberg Case Admits to Soviet Spying,” *New York Times*, September 11, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/12/nyregion/12spy.html>.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> *The Rosenberg File*, xv.

<sup>117</sup> *The Rosenberg File*, 98.

for the Soviet Union.<sup>118</sup> The National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case remains in operation to this day, though it has since changed its name to reflect its new goal in reopening the case.<sup>119</sup> The renamed Committee to Reopen the Rosenberg Case acknowledges the facts revealed by Sobell and the Venona records, but maintains that the Rosenbergs were still wrongly executed because they were charged with passing information on the atomic bomb to an enemy nation, even though the Soviet Union and the United States were allies at the time of the alleged crime.<sup>120</sup> The Committee hopes to have the U.S. Department of Justice review the case and acknowledge its flaws, and possibly exonerate the Rosenbergs of the “wrongful verdicts” in effort to keep hysteria-sponsored executions from happening in the future.<sup>121</sup>

As for the rest of the world’s current view of the Rosenberg case, perhaps little has changed. Steven Lubet, a law professor at Northwestern University, wrote a review for a book that dealt with the Dreyfus Affair, in which he briefly talked about how he once had a French foreign exchange student in one of his classes who discussed the Rosenberg case with him.<sup>122</sup> According to his student, the Rosenberg case was a part of every secondary school’s curriculum in her home country, and that it was taught as an American counterpart to the Dreyfus Affair.<sup>123</sup> This discussion took place sometime in the early 2000s, and it is possible that French education has changed since, but there is still something to be said for the fact that the Rosenberg case has continued to be interpreted as an example of the U.S.’s past dealings with anti-Semitism and war hysteria.

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<sup>118</sup> *The Rosenberg File*, 450.

<sup>119</sup> "An Excerpt from 'Exoneration' by Emily Arnow Alman and David Alman: NCRRC," accessed April 15, 2013, <http://ncrrc.org/an-excerpt-from-exoneration-by-emily-arnow-alman-and-david-alman-2>.

<sup>120</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions: NCRRC," accessed April 15, 2013, <http://ncrrc.org/rosenbergs/faq>.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> "Why the Dreyfus Affair Does and Doesn't Matter," 340.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

Assuming Lubet's student's word is anything to go by, France was still purporting the same (or at least, a very similar) version of the Rosenberg case that it had used nearly half a century before, even after the release of the Venona documents confirmed Julius' involvement in Soviet spy activity. Even so, perhaps this view of the Rosenberg case is justified. June 19 of 2013 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the couple's execution, and yet there has been no movement by the U.S. Department of Justice to acknowledge the possible mishandling of the trial, despite the efforts of the NCRRC. Even if the case was not a simple product of anti-Semitism or Cold War hysteria as many have speculated, there is still no excuse for the fact that, as of now, there is no proof of Ethel Rosenberg's guilt, or at least, no proof that she was guilty of the charges made against her. That alone ought to be enough for a reexamination of the case and perhaps Ethel's exoneration, but such a reaction has yet to be seen. Dreyfus was eventually pardoned by the president of the Republic, and apparently his case is still openly taught as a mishandling of justice at the hands of his own country.<sup>124</sup> If the U.S. has done nothing similar for the memory of Ethel Rosenberg, then it is little wonder that the case is viewed with such scrutiny by the outside world to this day.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 330.

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