

Whitewashing the Rosenbergs' Treason Record

On June 19, 1953, two Americans – a husband and wife – were put to death for turning their backs on their country. The couple were sent to the electric chair after being convicted of espionage against the United States. Throughout the 1940s, Julius Rosenberg – with the complicity and aide of his wife Ethel – sat at the center of a vast spy network responsible for the theft of numerous American military secrets. The Rosenbergs' espionage activities ultimately aided the Soviet Union in the development of their nuclear weapons program.

Yet, in his book *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn works for six-and-a-half pages to convince readers that the Rosenbergs were actually victims of an anti-Communist witch hunt. In Zinn's view, the Rosenbergs were brought up on flimsy charges after being unjustly targeted for their political beliefs amid the supposed anti-Communist "hysteria" of the early Cold War. Zinn's attempt to cast doubt on the guilt of the Rosenbergs fits into a wider effort in his book to white-wash the history of the Communist Party in the U.S. and the Communist movement worldwide, for which he was a lifelong fellow traveler.

Of the case against the Rosenbergs, Zinn writes "there were troubling aspects to all of this."¹ Zinn's evidence of injustice comes mostly in the form of leading questions attempting to impugn the credibility and character of the witnesses, prosecutors, and judges in the case.

One of those witnesses was Harry Gold. Gold was a Swiss-born Russian Jew who worked as a chemist on the Manhattan Project. Starting in the 1930s, he became involved in a number of Soviet spy rings and at one point served as a courier for a source in the Rosenberg network. Gold was already serving a prison sentence on an unrelated espionage conviction when he began providing testimony regarding the Rosenberg ring. This apparently troubles Zinn, who asks "Did Gold cooperate in return for early release from prison?"² Zinn's evidence? "After serving fifteen years of his thirty-year sentence, [Gold] was paroled."³

The source Gold couriered for was a machinist on the Manhattan Project named David Greenglass. After being outed by Gold, Greenglass (who also happened to be the brother of Julius' wife) similarly agreed to testify. This also troubles Zinn. "Did Greenglass – under indictment at the time he testified – also know that his life depended on his cooperation?"⁴ Because in Zinn's world, anyone who agrees to testify in exchange for a reduced sentence is therefore a liar.

Zinn then shifts gears. Now tacitly accepting the veracity of Greenglass' testimony, Zinn instead questions the value of the specific intelligence he provided to the Soviets. "How reliable a memorizer of atomic information was David Greenglass, an ordinary-level machinist, not a scientist?"⁵ But this is irrelevant. It's the intent that matters. Greenglass could have been leaking

¹ Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics; Reissue edition, Kindle, November 17, 2015), 9332. <http://a.co/aG5aBfX>

² Zinn, 9333.

³ Zinn, 9333.

⁴ Zinn, 9334.

⁵ Zinn, 9335.

the cafeteria's beef stew recipe; if he believed himself to be leaking classified nuclear secrets, then he was committing a crime.

Perhaps most absurdly, Zinn acts surprised "that Gold was a frequent and highly imaginative liar."⁶ Gold worked as a Soviet spy for the better part of two decades. It wasn't his unshakeable honesty that kept him from getting caught through all those years.

"How reliable was Gold's testimony?"⁷ Zinn asks. Prompting that question from Zinn was Gold's admission to having developed a cover story which included "a fictional wife and fictional children."⁸ Apparently, during testimony in a later trial, the defense attorney asked Gold: ". . . you lied for a period of six years?" Gold responded: "I lied for a period of sixteen years, not alone six years."⁹

Zinn then carries on like this for several more pages, attempting to cast doubt on various witnesses, impugning the character of prosecutors and judges, and appealing to the celebrity of such Rosenberg sympathizers such as Albert Einstein and Pablo Picasso as he builds his narrative of the Communists as hapless victims, the government as hysterical and ham-fisted, and the minds of the American people as being "permeated with anti-Communism."¹⁰

It is unnecessary to attempt to re-litigate the Rosenbergs' trial here. Even if we take for granted Zinn's perspective that the Rosenbergs looked innocent from where he was writing in the late 1970s, many subsequent revelations have shown beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were in fact guilty of espionage.

Yet, Zinn made no attempt to update his coverage of the Rosenbergs' case in later editions of the book. This is not because the book was not updated at all. On the contrary, with each subsequent edition Zinn added additional chapters. When asked about two particularly significant revelations a couple of years before his death, Zinn waved off the idea the subject of the Rosenbergs' would ever need updating.

Most of these revelations came in the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War. The fall of the Iron Curtain led to the new availability in the West of vast troves of once out-of-reach Soviet information. In United States, the end of the Cold War led similarly to the declassification of information about U.S. counterintelligence efforts dating back to at least the Rosenberg era.

The first significant revelation emerged in 1990, with publication for the first time in the West of the memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev, head of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964. According to Khrushchev, the Rosenbergs provided "very significant help in accelerating the production of our atomic bomb."¹¹

⁶ Zinn, 9339.

⁷ Zinn, 9338.

⁸ Zinn, 9340.

⁹ Zinn, 9340.

¹⁰ Zinn, 9387.

¹¹ Robert D. McFadden, *Khrushchev on Rosenbergs: Stoking Old Embers*. The New York Times, September 25, 1990. <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/09/25/world/khrushchev-on-rosenbergs-stoking-old-embers.html>

Then, in 1997, a former KGB case officer visited the United States and conducted a number of public interviews about the Rosenberg spy ring. While stationed at the Soviet consulate in New York City from 1940 to 1946, Alexander Feklisov had been responsible for receiving intelligence from Julius Rosenberg and other spies. In an interview to *The Washington Post*, Feklisov "credited Rosenberg with helping to organize an important industrial espionage ring for Moscow and handing over top secret information on military electronics."¹² In addition, Feklisov called Julius a "hero" and "a true revolutionary, who was willing to sacrifice himself for his beliefs."¹³

Zinn reprinted *A People's History* in 1995 and again in 1999. Both times failing to update his coverage of the Rosenberg case in light of the revelations from Khrushchev and Feklisov.

But, to again give Zinn the benefit of the doubt, both those revelations were more potentially unverifiable witness testimony, which had been among the chief criticisms of the evidence used to convict the Rosenbergs in the first place. Not just by Zinn, but by the fully panoply of leftists and Communist fellow travelers in America for more than 40 years.

The irrefutable proof finally became available in 1995. A once classified U.S. government counterintelligence program called Venona was declassified during an official public ceremony, resulting in the eventual release of thousands of decrypted Soviet cables from the 1940s and '50s. A former historian at the Library of Congress named John Earl Haynes was instrumental in the publication of the cables.

In his 1999 book *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America*, Haynes writes "the Venona messages clearly display Julius Rosenberg's role as the leader of a productive ring of Soviet spies."¹⁴ ¹⁵ According to Haynes, "twenty-one deciphered KGB cables, all from 1944 and 1945, discuss Julius Rosenberg."¹⁶ The decrypted cables revealed a network of six sources, two active liaison-couriers, and three support personnel.¹⁷ ¹⁸

The cables also confirmed Julius' work as a source in his own right. According to Haynes, while working on classified military projects at Emerson Radio in 1944, Julius achieved "a singular espionage coup, stealing a working sample of the proximity fuse, one of the most innovative advances of American military technology in World War II."¹⁹ ²⁰

¹² Michael Dobbs, JULIUS ROSENBERG SPIED, RUSSIAN SAYS. *The Washington Post*, March 16, 1997.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1997/03/16/julius-rosenberg-spied-russian-says/f6ae1ead-f8d4-4485-83c6-ec460b5ed4da/?utm_term=.9ea79f761ba5

¹³ Dobbs, *The Washington Post*.

See also: Joseph Albright and Marcia Kunstel, "Retired KGB Spymaster Lifts Veil on Rosenberg Espionage," *Washington Times* (16 March 1997). A Discovery Channel television documentary, "The Rosenberg File: Case Closed" (23 March 1997).

¹⁴ John Earl Haynes, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America*. Yale University Press (April 10, 1999, Kindle edition), 254.

¹⁵ The full library of Venona cables is available on the NSA website.

<https://www.nsa.gov/news-features/declassified-documents/venona/>

¹⁶ Haynes, 4000.

¹⁷ Haynes, 4107.

¹⁸ These cables had been well known to the FBI in the 1950s, but had not been introduced at trial due to the classified nature of the decryption program.

¹⁹ Haynes, 4112.

²⁰ Haynes, 6122. Note 40, Chapter 10, regarding the proximity fuse: "American engineers succeeded in placing inside an artillery shell a tiny and very rugged radar unit connected to the shell's fuse. The device set off the shell when it came close to (even if it did not hit) a target, a feature

You'd be hard pressed to conceive of evidence more damning than Soviet cables making explicit reference to Julius Rosenberg and his work as a Communist spy. Yet, again Zinn left his coverage of the Rosenbergs untouched in both his 2003 and his 2005 edition of *A People's History*.

Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, in 2008, an accomplice of Julius Rosenberg named Morton Sobell finally admitted, at the age of 91, that he had in fact been a spy, as had Julius.²¹ Sobell was convicted in the 1950s and served just under 18 years of a 30 year prison sentence. But prior to the 2008 admission, Sobell had always maintained his innocence.

Three days later, the Rosenbergs' sons made a public statement to the effect that they had come to terms with the obvious guilt of their parents.²² This was significant because the two men had spent much of their adult lives to that point working to clear their parents' names.

A *New York Times* reporter asked Zinn what he thought about the revelations and Zinn mostly just shrugged. "I'm not shocked," he said. "[But] to me it didn't matter whether they were guilty or not."²³

For Zinn, the truth does not matter. So, despite numerous credible testimonies and the avalanche of evidence from the Venona decrypts, not a single word about the Rosenbergs has been updated or changed in Zinn's book. That is with the book having now gone through five editions, with the latest in paperback in 2005, and a Kindle edition in 2015.

that greatly increased the efficiency of anti-aircraft shells. The device was called a proximity fuse because it set off the shell in the proximity of the target aircraft."

²¹ Sam Roberts. Figure in Rosenberg Case Admits to Soviet Spying. *The New York Times*, September 11, 2008.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/12/nyregion/12spy.html>

²² Sam Roberts. Father Was a Spy, Sons Conclude With Regret. *The New York Times*, September 16, 2008.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/17/nyregion/17rosenbergs.html>

²³ Sam Roberts. A Spy Confesses, and Still Some Weep for the Rosenbergs. *The New York Times*, September 20, 2008.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/weekinreview/21roberts.html>