

Ronald Radosh, Joyce Milton. *The Rosenberg File*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997. xxx + 616 pp. \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-07205-1.



Reviewed by Robbie Lieberman (Southern Illinois University)

Published on H-Pol (May, 1998)

A Search for Meaning

First published in 1983, this compelling and highly readable book sparked a lively debate concerning the facts of the Rosenberg case. Julius Rosenberg was arrested in June 1950, Ethel in August (on an afternoon when her two young sons were at her mother-in-law's house). They were tried for conspiracy to commit espionage, not for treason, since they had supposedly passed information to the Soviet Union during the war, when the United States and the Soviet Union were allies. The prosecutor was Irving Saypol, judged by *Time* magazine to be "the nation's number one legal hunter of top communists." Judge Irving Kaufman, accusing the Rosenbergs of having put the atomic bomb in the hands of the Soviet Union and causing the Korean War, sentenced them to death. Despite a worldwide campaign for clemency, they were executed in Sing-Sing Prison in upstate New York on June 19, 1953. Ever since then a debate has raged about their guilt or innocence, the technical usefulness of any data they may have passed, the reasons why Ethel Rosenberg's brother, David Greenglass, named her and Julius as spies, and so on. The case has obvious symbolic meaning—the executions were meant to be a warning to Americans involved in, or considering involve-

ment in, actions that were disloyal to the United States at the height of the Cold War.

While the facts of the case continue to be debated, more significant in the long run is the meaning, not only of the case itself, but the controversy about it. The 1983 debate split neatly along ideological lines, with the *New Republic* hailing *The Rosenberg File* as "a magnificent and definitive study," and *Commentary* labeling it "superlative" (Nathan Glazer used the word "honest" three times in the first four paragraphs of his review to commend the authors and chastise anyone who might question their interpretation). *National Review*—referring to the authors as "practicing leftists"—concluded that "We had 'cold-war politics' because there was a cold war." Thus the real moral of the story was "If you want to stay out of the chair, get out of the spy business." On the other side of the spectrum, *The Nation* bemoaned the fact that Radosh and Milton chose to sort out the facts rather than the meaning of the case—and then proceeded to question the facts, especially the evidence about the role of the American Communist party in recruiting and sacrificing the Rosenbergs.[1]

In the mainstream press and scholarly journals, reviewers seemed to miss the meaning of the debate taking place in the journals of opinion. Not one saw fit to comment on Radosh and Milton's "ultimate moral," which was that for all that the government and the prosecution deserved to be criticized for their conduct in the Rosenberg case, the real culprit was communism: "if the Rosenberg case has an ultimate moral, it is precisely to point up the dangers of adhering to an unexamined political myth" (p. 453). The Rosenbergs were guilty of belief in communism and adulation of the Soviet Union. This is the end result of Radosh and Milton's "search for the truth." The subtitle has been removed, but the claim to have uncovered the truth remains an important part of Radosh's view.[2] His "truth" is that American communism was a threat to national security, and that those who see Communists as anything else are naive at best.

Thus, the most significant passage in the new introduction to *The Rosenberg File* is not about new evidence, but about the meaning of the Rosenberg's guilt: "Confirmation of the existence of the Rosenberg spy ring ... challenges the myth that the CPUSA was essentially a grass-roots organization, independent of Moscow." The authors go on to criticize Eric Foner for writing that American Communists were part of a "complex and diverse" organization and that the Party was not the "nest of spies portrayed by the FBI" (p. xxix). They also note that "To affirm the existence of the Rosenberg spy ring does not in any way justify the excesses of McCarthyism" (p. xxx). In other words, some McCarthyism is justified, just not the "excesses." But, as Ellen Schrecker, among others, demonstrates in her scholarship, including the newly-published *Many are the Crimes*, McCarthyism was excess in the sense that it meant sacrificing basic liberties for the sake of a particular notion of security.[3] There is no question that the anti-communist crusade did more damage to the United States than American Communists, including those convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage.

The terms of this debate have changed very little since 1983. Despite the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union, the argument about the nature of American communism continues. The only difference is that the anti-communists who have plumbed the Soviet archives now claim to have more evidence to support their case.

All of this is to say that the new edition of *The Rosenberg File* differs little from the first one except that the authors are more smug and self-assured about their po-

sition. The new introduction presents evidence that has become available since 1983, all from Soviet sources. The authors now claim they can document the disappearance of two members of "Rosenberg's ring" (an oft-repeated phrase). They also cite testimony of former KGB agents, and material from the Venona files. All of this reaffirms their earlier conclusion that Julius Rosenberg was a spy, Ethel Rosenberg was his accessory, and that any claims that they were working for the cause of peace and socialism are simply ridiculous.

But this is where their ideology gets in the way of telling—and understanding—the story. They are so anxious to convict the CPUSA that they do so without much evidence at all. They are contemptuous of the Rosenbergs' view of their own "innocence," and of anyone who justified espionage on ideological grounds. They indict the Communist Party for wanting the Rosenbergs dead so that they could be used as martyrs, and they claim that those who took part in the campaign for clemency were manipulated. This last claim, in particular, is repeated in the new introduction without any new evidence to support it. The conclusion of *The Rosenberg File* sounds "balanced," but only half of it is based on a careful marshaling of evidence, while the other half is based on ideology:

Julius Rosenberg was not innocent. He was guilty of spying; and Ethel, though convicted on tainted evidence, was almost certainly his accomplice. Yet their defenders are also correct in saying that they were scapegoats, condemned to death less because of the nature and seriousness of their crime than because at a particular moment in time their deaths served a cathartic function—for Communists and anti-Communists alike (p. 448).

The authors are not balanced in their treatment of the CPUSA. Should their assumptions cause us to question their other conclusions? The fact is that all the evidence is not in. But even if Julius Rosenberg was a spy, this does not make every Communist a potential spy. It does not justify McCarthyism. And it does not mean there are no other stories to tell about the CPUSA except those that have to do with espionage. The existence of a network of spies does not invalidate the influence of American Communists on mass culture or the labor movement or race relations.[4] "The truth" is that in much of the current debate, the two sides are talking past each other, and that both claims are possible—there was a network of spies, and there was a complex and diverse organization that had a significant, and sometimes positive, impact on American culture.

Finally, one can see that Radosh and Milton have gone

farther to the right since 1983. In the first edition of *The Rosenberg File*, they criticized the judge for his improper ex parte communications, the prosecution for using evidence that was highly questionable, and the FBI for its insistence on using Ethel (including sending her to her death) to try to get Julius to talk. They do not retract any of these claims in the new edition. Indeed, they express hope that their book “will stand as the most careful and balanced assessment of this important episode in the early Cold War era” (p. xxx). In fact, though, the authors have hardened their stance, making them more sympathetic to the prosecution. As they state in their new introduction, “Although we continue to feel that the use of the death penalty in this context was improper and unfair, the Venona releases show that, overall, our justice system functioned with integrity under trying circumstances” (p. xxii). The domestic Cold War is as hot as ever.

Notes:

[1]. Eric Breindel, “Rosenbergs Redux,” *The New Republic*, October 31, 1983, 30. Nathan Glazer, “Verdicts of History,” *Commentary*, October 1983, 66. Richard

Brookhiser, “Rosenberg and Guildenstern are Dead,” *National Review*, November 25, 1983, 1486. Victor Navasky, “Of Atom Spies and Ambiguities,” *The Nation*, October 22, 1983, 1.

[2]. See, for example, Ronald Radosh, “The Two Evils,” *The New Republic*, May 11, 1998, 38.

[3]. Ellen Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1988.

[4]. See, for example, Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* New York: Verso, 1996. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990. Michael E. Brown, ed., *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu. [The book review editor for H-Pol is Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

Citation: Robbie Lieberman. Review of Radosh, Ronald; Milton, Joyce, *The Rosenberg File*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. May, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2065>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.