

Intelligence in Public Media

Ethel Rosenberg: An American Tragedy

Anne Sebba. (St. Martin's Press, 2021, Kindle edition).

Reviewed by J. E. Leonardson

It's not every day that a book on espionage manages to quote Sylvia Plath, but then Ethel Rosenberg is not your average subject for a spy biography. Almost 70 years after her execution, she remains enigmatic. Two especially intriguing questions—who was the real Ethel Rosenberg, not the Ethel of myth and caricature, and why did she choose to die rather than confess and save herself?—still hover over the history of the case and are the issues that Anne Sebba addresses in her new biography of Ethel. It is an interesting work, but it still fails to rescue Ethel's historical reputation.

Sebba begins with a bleak portrait of Ethel's early life. Born Ethel Greenglass in 1915 to immigrant Jewish parents, she grew up in poverty on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Ethel was an intelligent girl who did well in school and showed promise as a singer and actress. Her mother, Tessie, however, believed Ethel was destined for marriage and motherhood and thus saw no value in her daughter's academic performance. Instead, Tessie belittled Ethel's accomplishments and reserved her affections for Ethel's brothers, especially David, the baby of the family. With no chance for further education, Ethel went straight from high school to clerical work. She continued acting in neighborhood productions and gradually became involved in labor organizing and left-wing politics, to which she lent her theatrical talents. For the most part, however, Ethel was going nowhere until December 1936, when she met Julius Rosenberg.

At first glance, Julius was quite a catch. A student in electrical engineering at City College of New York, he seemed to have a bright future, shared Ethel's leftist politics and, unlike her family, treated her with respect and affection. Ethel, in return became passionately devoted to Julius and her world came to revolve around him; she gave up her dreams of acting and singing and instead made Julius and his political activism the "the prism through which she viewed her life."

Unfortunately, Julius turned out to be a poor choice of husband. At the start of their marriage, the couple lived on the brink of poverty but, while World War II raged,

Julius worked in relatively well-paid defense industrial and government jobs. Suspicions that he was a communist—accurate, as it happened—limited his prospects, however, and eventually caused him to be fired. After the war, he and David Greenglass opened a small machine shop. Almost from the start, it teetered on the brink of failure, and Julius and Ethel barely scraped by. In fact, Julius's only professional success was as a spy. Recruiting friends from City College, in 1941 he had formed a ring stealing defense technologies and then—after David was drafted in 1943 and a year later sent to Los Alamos—atomic secrets for the Soviets. At the end of the war, even this success came to an end as the Soviets, rightly fearing the FBI was starting to uncover their spies, "deactivated" him. (Ethel, it is important to note, was aware of and approved Julius's spying but played at most a minor role in the ring's work.)

Ethel had plenty of difficulties beyond money and Julius's foundering careers. The couple had their first son, Michael, in 1943. He proved to be a difficult baby and young child, and Ethel was desperately unsure of herself as a mother. She worked hard at motherhood—Ethel "identified as a mother and homemaker, and being a good one really mattered to her," says Sebba—reading parenting books and magazines and, ultimately, seeking help from a child therapist and a psychiatrist. The couple's second son, Robert, arrived in 1947 and was a much easier baby, but tight budgets and Ethel's continuing difficulties with Michael left her further and further from the mainstream postwar culture that emphasized women's roles as wives to prosperous husbands and competent mothers to their children.

Ethel's world collapsed completely in 1950. The FBI had been closing in and came for David on June 5th. He quickly confessed and the Bureau arrested Julius the next day. Agents came for Ethel in August. During the summer, Tessie and the family turned against Ethel, friends and neighbors began to avoid her, and money ran short. Just as bad, her attempt to present herself to the media as a good wife and homemaker turned into a public relations disaster. Inviting reporters to the family's

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apartment a few days after Julius's arrest, Ethel tried to play the "role of an unassuming housewife . . . [but] did not convince" and instead left the impression of an unemotional "Communist wife, not telling the truth, who had allowed the family unit to be destroyed." Ethel's image never recovered from the debacle. With her plain looks, dowdy clothes, and refusal to confess not even for the sake of not orphaning her sons, she was easily branded as someone who rejected midcentury American values and gender roles, and who therefore, must have been guilty of betraying her country. On top of this, to save himself David committed perjury by testifying that Ethel had been an active participant in the spy ring. Even before she faced the might of the Justice Department, FBI, and a blatantly biased judge—while she was defended by small-time lawyers who were in far over their heads—Sebba tells us, Ethel never had a chance.

Still, Ethel could have saved herself. Until the moment she was put into the electric chair in June 1953, the government would have spared her life had she confessed (Julius received the same offer). Sebba says this was simply unacceptable to Ethel. Not only did she believe that she and Julius had done nothing wrong and therefore had nothing to confess, but Ethel had additional reasons to refuse. In particular, Ethel had a "determination to make something valuable of her life according to her own moral standards," which in her case meant following the communist party line "uncritically, unquestionably and aggressively." To have confessed would have been a betrayal of these beliefs. Reinforcing this was the same perfectionism that drove Ethel to do well in school, try to make a career as a singer, and then seek to improve herself as a mother. At the end, it translated into a determination to show "dignity, confidence, and courage" in the face of death.

Sebba is best on these aspects of Ethel's personality. She gives us Ethel as a victim and outsider, a woman doomed because of the betrayals of those around her as well as misogyny and her failure to conform to the cultural expectations of the day. These are aspects of Ethel's life that seldom have been discussed and, it must be said, Sebba arouses a certain amount of sympathy for her.

When women's history meets intelligence history, however, *Ethel Rosenberg* becomes muddled. An English journalist and author of biographies of women as varied as Jennie Churchill, Wallis Simpson, and Mother Theresa,

Sebba clearly is not familiar with the complexities of espionage cases and spies' motivations. She relies mostly on secondary sources and provides only superficial accounts and analyses of key points, leaving readers with little context. Sebba's account of the spy ring and its activities, for example, is fragmented and her understanding of New York's Jewish immigrant culture seems based on reading Irving Howe and little else—describing matzoh as a "traditional Jewish flatbread" suggests a lack of familiarity with Ethel's milieu and the forces that propelled her toward communism. Sebba appears also to have only a cursory understanding of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) and its subordination to Soviet policy and espionage; her only comment on the Rosenbergs' decision to remain loyal to the party in August 1939 when Germany and the USSR agreed to a nonaggression pact—a traumatic event for party members, especially Jewish communists—was that the couple simply accepted the "absurd line that the [pact] was an act of self-protection by Stalin."

Moreover, while Sebba acknowledges that Ethel was complicit in Julius's espionage, she tries to get her off the hook by arguing that Ethel believed the couple was "morally correct, on the right side of history" and, therefore, that they could never confess or, even in the minutes after Julius's death, that she could not betray his memory by admitting to what they had done. "Was that a crime," asks Sebba, "let alone a crime punishable by death?" The answer is: yes, it is a crime to be a party to your spouse's espionage, even if it does not merit execution. Just ask Rosario Ames.

This is where, in my view, *Ethel Rosenberg* falls apart. Ambition, perfectionism, and a determination to make her death meaningful suggest an Ethel who sought to take charge of her destiny. But along the way Sebba shows us an Ethel whose support for Stalin and communism had veered into unthinking fanaticism, and remained so even as the CPUSA abandoned her and Julius. The first view gives us an active, thinking Ethel, the second takes away her agency and leaves her passive and, again, a victim. Sebba tries to resolve the contradiction by claiming that "by 1950 Communism was merely one aspect of Ethel's ambiguous, many-sided life and it was not her principal focus." Perhaps so, but by the eve of her execution three years later the question of whether to die for communism likely was uppermost in Ethel's mind, and it appears that she accepted martyrdom for the cause. That the cause was

squalid and Ethel's sacrifice was for a lie are points that Sebba dances around rather than confront. Given this, it's hard to see exactly what is the "American tragedy" of the subtitle.

This is the difficulty for Sebba, and anyone else, who tries to make Ethel Rosenberg into a noble figure. As

useful as it is to demonstrate that she was a multidimensional person who was as much sinned against as sinner, the truth remains that Ethel had choices and made her decisions. That she went along with Julius and his espionage, and then followed him to the bitter end, was her doing and no one else's.



The reviewer: J. E. Leonardson is the penname of a CIA Directorate of Analysis officer.

