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FBI FILE: JULIUS AND ETHEL ROSENBERG



Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were a nondescript couple accused in 1950 by the U.S. government of operating a Soviet spy network and giving the Soviet Union plans for the atomic bomb. The trial of the Rosenbergs, which began in March 6, 1951, became a political event of greater importance than any damage they may have done to the United States. It was one of the most controversial trials of the twentieth century. After months in prison the Rosenbergs maintained their innocence and began to write poignant letters, which were widely published, protesting their treatment. A movement began to protest the “injustice” of the Rosenberg trial. In the months between the sentencing and execution, criticism of the trial grew more strident, and major demonstrations were held. Jean-Paul Sartre, the French philosopher, called the case “a legal lynching which smears with blood a whole nation.” In spite of attempts at appeal and a temporary state of execution by U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed on June 19, 1953. Both refused to confess. Their guilt and the harshness of their sentences continue to be vigorously debated. Recent studies of the couple’s activities show that the evidence against them was overwhelming. It is difficult, however, to imagine the execution of a married couple with young children without understanding the paranoia the Cold War produced. Since the early 1950s the Rosenbergs have been viewed by many as martyrs, conveniently sacrificed by an iniquitous United States in the name of anticommunism.

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