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A Nation Faces Conflict, 1939-1960 / Communism / The Historical Debate

Historical debate continues about many issues related to the Cold War and the threat posed by communism; this is especially true with respect to the controversial episodes involving Alger Hiss and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Historians continue to debate the role of Alger Hiss both in terms of his likely participation in espionage and the ways in which his case became a cause celebre for those who charged the government with having persecuted an innocent man for decades following his conviction. While more recent evidence from former Soviet archives does nothing to clear Hiss of involvement, the true nature of Hiss's role remains opaque and is an ongoing source of controversy among diplomatic historians and historians of American communism.

For the two decades following the Hiss case, most writers who addressed the topic came to their studies already convinced of the guilt or innocence of Alger Hiss; this included Hiss and Whittaker Chambers, both of whom wrote books on the subject. Hiss also coauthored a book with his son Tony in the 1970s. By that time, however, at least one historian sought to treat the case more on its merits than on the passions it produced. Allen Weinstein's *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case* concluded that Hiss at the very least had misled investigators and his own defense team. In addition, Weinstein could find no evidence of a government conspiracy against Hiss. Almost immediately, however, Weinstein's book became part of the still-bitter debate over the Hiss case and what it represented. Hiss continued to deny any wrongdoing and challenged Weinstein's methods and motives.

By 2000, many in the academic community who had previously maintained the innocence of Alger Hiss began to admit that the preponderance of the evidence pointed more convincingly toward his guilt. Ellen Schrecker, who in 1998 had maintained that the Hiss case "remains problematic in many ways," admitted just two years later that it was no longer possible (at least in some cases) to protest the innocence of Hiss and others.

Despite these often-grudging admissions, the Hiss case remains less clear-cut than, for example, that of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Historians and other scholars debate (at times seemingly endlessly) the significance of the one decoded message from the Venona decrypts that referenced an agent with the code name of "Ales"; someone in the government added a handwritten note that Alger Hiss was the likely culprit. These ongoing debates raise some issues that appear more political than historical while others, such as differences over translations in the Russian decrypts, do have real implications for a better, more nuanced understanding of the role of American communists in Soviet espionage.

A similarly contentious battle has raged over the case of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, who were executed for espionage in 1953. For many years, activists, scholars, and others felt passionately that the Rosenbergs had been denied justice on a number of different levels. Given the backlash against McCarthyism that occurred from the mid-1950s onwards, and particularly after the rise of New Left scholarship in the late 1960s and 1970s, many even questioned whether or not the

Rosenbergs had been involved in espionage at all.

As was the case with Alger Hiss, some who defended the Rosenbergs did so because of personal or family connections. This was particularly true of Michael and Robert Meeropol, the two sons of Ethel and Julius. In a 2002 PBS television episode of *NOVA*, Michael essentially conceded that his father had engaged in espionage but labeled him a "small fry spy" and went on to say that the government had "murdered" Ethel Rosenberg "in cold blood" when Julius refused to break.

Others decried the conduct of the prosecution for other reasons. One of the more critical attacks on the proceedings was *Invitation to an Inquest*, a 1965 book by Walter and Miriam Schneir. After laboriously going through the details of the alleged spying and pointing out what they saw as the liberties taken by the government with the truth, the Schneirs ended by saying, "The Rosenbergs . . . pressured by a vast state apparatus to tell a story they knew to be untrue, stood firm." Their account, influenced at least in part by a more sensitive appreciation for the misconduct that did occur during the trial, is one of the most sympathetic toward the Rosenbergs.

In 1983, Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton published the first edition of *The Rosenberg File*, which used newly available evidence (with the exception of the Venona transcripts that have since revealed much more about Soviet espionage in the United States) to show links between Julius Rosenberg and various others implicated in espionage. They repudiated much of what the Schneirs had suggested, especially the contention that accomplice Harry Gold simply had lied about Julius Rosenberg's involvement.

With books titled *The Murder of the Rosenbergs* and *Fatal Error* published since then, it is clear that the debate over the guilt of the couple and the harsh punishment meted out to them continued into the 1990s. Increasingly, however, more and more people (including the Schneirs) accepted that Julius had in all likelihood been significantly involved. Much of the criticism then shifted focus to the government's conduct during the trial and the cynical and ultimately deadly way in which it used Ethel's prosecution to try to force Julius into confessing.

As with much of the ongoing debate of the Cold War, political agendas seem to dominate the discussion. Those sympathetic to the Rosenbergs (or to the Left more broadly) emphasize the abuse of power by the government and note that much of the information was already known to scientists on both sides. Those engaged in what some have termed Cold War "triumphalism" remind readers (and listeners) that spies such as the Rosenbergs knowingly engaged in illegal acts with the intention of helping the Soviet Union at the expense of the United States.

MLA:

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