

Atomic bomb secrets: Espionage and the Manhattan Project

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Image 1. The Alpha I Racetrack, located in at the K-25 plant in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, one of the main project sites of the Manhattan Project. It was designed to separate isotopes of uranium to create atomic bombs. Image: James Edward Westcott/Wikimedia Commons

They called it the Manhattan Project. It was a secret, government-funded effort to build an atomic bomb. European physicists had figured out how to split the nucleus of an atom in late 1938. They believed that applying nuclear fission on a large scale could create a powerful weapon. The physicists worried about what would happen if the Germans figured out how to do so first. As World War II (1939–1945) spread across Europe, a few scientists shared their concerns with the United States. They urged President Franklin D. Roosevelt to support further research. He did. By 1943, in nearly 20 locations across the country, men and women were working under top-secret conditions to build a bomb.

The Rosenbergs

Ethel Greenglass met Julius Rosenberg in December 1936 at a charity benefit in New York City. They fell in love and became inseparable. They both attended Communist Party events. Those gatherings were popular among young people like them, who were the children of hard-working

immigrants living in a crowded city. Julius graduated from college with an engineering degree in February 1939. The couple married that June. In December 1939, Julius joined the Communist Party.

As a member of the party, Julius had the job of recruiting other members, so he persuaded Ethel's brother, David Greenglass, and his wife to join. At the time, Julius was working for the U.S. Signal Corps, but he was fired in February 1945 after it was discovered that he was active in the Communist Party. He quickly found another job. Greenglass, a mechanical engineer, was working for the U.S. Army in Los Alamos, New Mexico.

The Secret's Out

Los Alamos was one of the secret Manhattan Project sites. Testing of an atomic bomb was taking place there. Many physicists, including Klaus Fuchs, a refugee of Nazi Germany who had fled to Great Britain, worked there.

Keeping the project a secret was difficult because spies were everywhere. Although the United States worked on the bomb with its allies Great Britain and Canada, it was reluctant to share information about their efforts with another ally, the Soviet Union. U.S. leaders did not trust the Soviet Union. Its leader, Joseph Stalin, was a dictator. And that Communist country had shown itself to have antidemocratic attitudes toward other European nations.

Then, on July 16, 1945, a successful bomb was tested in the New Mexico desert. On August 6, 1945, the United States dropped its first atomic bomb on Japan.

Japan was an enemy during World War II. It had continued to fight after its ally, Germany, had surrendered in May. When the first bomb did not convince Japan to surrender, the United States dropped a second bomb three days later, on August 9. World War II ended shortly after that.

Caught!

After the war, Fuchs returned to England. In late 1948, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) turned over some shocking evidence to British intelligence: Fuchs had been spying for the Soviet Union. The evidence specifically involved the passing of atomic bomb secrets. Under interrogation, on January 24, 1950, Fuchs confessed. On May 22, 1950, American Harry Gold also admitted to spying. He had served as a courier between Fuchs and a contact in the KGB, the Soviet state security agency.

The FBI wanted Gold to identify others involved in atomic espionage. Gold described a soldier whom he had met in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in June 1945. The FBI did a search of Los Alamos records and the name "David Greenglass" came up and matched Gold's description. The FBI called Greenglass in. The agents hadn't expected much, but he was quite willing to talk.

In his first interview, Greenglass admitted that he had passed atomic bomb information to Gold. He also confessed that Julius Rosenberg had recruited his wife, Ruth, to persuade him to be a spy and that spying had been Julius' idea.



The FBI questioned Julius next. The bureau already had a file on him because of his Communist Party ties. On July 17, 1950, FBI agents raided the Rosenberg apartment and arrested Julius and, a month later, agents arrested Ethel, too. The FBI expected Julius to "talk" if Ethel was in prison, but he didn't.

Guilty Or Not Guilty?

The Rosenbergs were charged under the Espionage Act of 1917, which was originally intended to stop the passing of the nation's strategic secrets during wartime. When it was passed, the United States had just entered World War I (1914–1918). By the early 1950s, although no nations were fighting a traditional war, the United States and the Soviet Union were engaged in the Cold War.

The Rosenbergs were charged with conspiracy to commit espionage. They were accused of passing atomic bomb secrets to the Soviet Union. Greenglass said that he brought information to the Rosenbergs and that Ethel typed up copies to be passed on to the Soviets.

The Rosenbergs' three-week trial was held in March 1951. People had strong opinions on both sides of the case, and the media followed it closely. The FBI wanted the Rosenbergs to serve as an example of what would happen to Communist spies in America. The trial proceeded quickly, and the Rosenbergs didn't have much of a chance. Even before receiving a "guilty" verdict from the jury and sentencing from the judge in April, the death sentence was already decided. The couple was sent to Sing Sing, a federal prison in Ossining, New York.

The Rosenbergs remained on death row for more than two years. Through their lawyer, Manny Bloch, they appealed their case. Kept in separate cells, they communicated through letters to each other and to other family members.

On June 19, 1953, the Rosenbergs' final appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court was denied and all hope for a reversal vanished. Julius urged Bloch to continue to plead their innocence. He and Ethel left their two sons, 10-year-old Michael and 6-year-old Robert, in Bloch's care.

Ethel felt no fear or regret. She believed that she and Julius were the first victims of American fascism. Throughout their ordeal, they had maintained their innocence. They were executed on June 19, when Ethel was 37 and Julius was 35.

The other spies revealed in the case all received lighter sentences. Klaus Fuchs received a 14-year prison sentence and served nine years. Harry Gold was sentenced to 30 years in prison, but he served less than half of that time before being released. A man named Morton Sobell also was convicted of being part of the spy ring, received 30 years in prison and served 18 years. David Greenglass received a 15-year sentence, but served about nine and a half years. Ruth Greenglass never was charged with a crime.

The Rosenberg case was the most sensational event of the Red Scare era. Americans feared that the stolen secrets had shown the Soviet Union how to build an atomic weapon. Historians now think that was not the case, although it may have sped up the Soviet timeline. But along with other events in the decade after World War II, it fed fears that Soviet spies and communist influence was spreading through American society. The trial remains controversial today.

Quiz

1 Read the sentence from the introduction [paragraph 1].

European physicists had figured out how to split the nucleus of an atom in late 1938.

What is one way the placement of this sentence develops the story behind the Manhattan Project?

- (A) It introduces the early research that led to the Manhattan Project.
- (B) It highlights other countries that developed an atomic bomb.
- (C) It contrasts how Europeans conducted experiments with how Americans conducted experiments.
- (D) It elaborates on the top-secret conditions that were needed to carry out the Manhattan Project.

2 How effective is the conclusion section "Guilty Or Not Guilty" at explaining why the Rosenberg case is still extremely controversial?

- (A) The conclusion is not effective because it presents only one point of view on the trial.
- (B) The conclusion is effective because it provides evidence as to why the trial was considered fair by some and not by others.
- (C) The conclusion is not effective because it does not compare and contrast the treatment of different spies.
- (D) The conclusion is effective because it presents the events of the case in chronological order.

3 Which option MOST accurately summarizes the article without judgment?

- (A) The U.S. rightfully convicted the communist spies who stole secrets from the Manhattan Project.
- (B) The Manhattan Project led to the U.S. dropping two bombs on Japan, thus ending World War II.
- (C) Secrets from the Manhattan Project were shared by Soviet spies who were later caught and found guilty.
- (D) Even though atomic bombs resulted from the Manhattan Project, they should not have been dropped on Japan.

4 Which sentence from the article would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?

- (A) As a member of the party, Julius had the job of recruiting other members, so he persuaded Ethel's brother, David Greenglass, and his wife to join.
- (B) On July 17, 1950, FBI agents raided the Rosenberg apartment and arrested Julius and, a month later, agents arrested Ethel, too.
- (C) People had strong opinions on both sides of the case, and the media followed it closely.
- (D) Americans feared that the stolen secrets had shown the Soviet Union how to build an atomic weapon.