

Background and Timeline on the Case of Ethel Rosenberg

1. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested respectively on July 17 and August 11, 1950, accused of conspiring to commit espionage for the Soviet Union.
2. Ten days after Ethel's arrest, on August 22, 1950, a top NSA official responsible for decoding Soviet communications, Meredith Gardner, wrote a memo explaining that Ethel Rosenberg was not a spy. This memo was declassified in August of 2024 and released by the NSA, and it is one of the documents sought by the sons of the Rosenbergs in their FOIA request filed in 2022.
3. The trial of the Rosenbergs, who were charged with conspiracy to commit espionage, commenced on March 6, 1951, and concluded with their convictions on March 29, 1953.
4. On June 19, 1953, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed after several judicial appeals and pleas for presidential clemency.
5. In 1975, Michael and Robert Meeropol, the sons of the Rosenbergs, filed a FOIA request which forced the release of many previously secret files. These documents revealed that during the trial, the judge communicated secretly with the prosecutors, including the infamous Roy Cohn, an assistant U.S. attorney, who helped prosecute Ethel Rosenberg by orchestrating what was later proven to be perjurious testimony by her brother, David Greenglass.
6. When the NSA released the VENONA transcriptions in 1995 – Soviet cables that documented Soviet spying in the United States – it was revealed that the Soviet spy agency, the KGB, gave all of its agents code names, among them David and Ruth Greenglass and Julius Rosenberg. However, the Soviet Union did not give Ethel Rosenberg such a code name. In fact, David and Ruth Greenglass and Julius Rosenberg did participate in espionage for the Soviet Union.
7. In a videotaped interview on CBS's "60-Minutes II" in December 2001, David Greenglass, Ethel's brother, admitted that he told the FBI that he would not cooperate with them if they charged his wife. He also admitted that he gave false testimony against his sister, Ethel, to save his wife, Ruth, from prison or the death penalty. He said on camera, "I would not sacrifice my wife and my children for my sister. How do you like that?"
8. In his grand jury testimony made public in 2015, Ethel's brother, David Greenglass, had contradicted his sworn trial testimony that Ethel participated actively in a conspiracy with him, his wife, Ruth Greenglass, Julius Rosenberg and others to spy for the Soviet Union.
9. In 2008, the released grand jury testimony of Ethel's sister-in-law, Ruth Greenglass, revealed significant contradictions with her trial testimony. When asked by the grand jury whether or not she was the one who had taken notes, Ruth responded "Yes. I wrote [the information] down on a piece of paper and [Julius Rosenberg] took it with him." This contradicted what Ruth asserted during the trial, where she said that it was Ethel who had written down the information.
10. Decades after Ethel's execution, William P. Rogers, then Deputy Attorney General in the Eisenhower administration, said of Ethel Rosenberg that "She called our bluff" further indicating the government knew she was not a spy and had cynically tried to coerce her to testify against her husband and possibly others. Later, Rogers would serve as Secretary of State under President Richard M. Nixon.