❝ REVIEW

Soviet spy – or human sacrifice? Ethel Rosenberg revisited

★★★★☆ 4/5

Biographer Anne Sebba makes a convincing case that Rosenberg's fate was sealed by Cold War hysteria and 1950s chauvinism

By Jake Kerridge
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Ethel Rosenberg's mugshots: she was convicted of passing US atomic secrets to the Soviets in 1951 | CREDIT: Hulton Archive/Getty

The execution of Ethel Rosenberg ranks with those of Thomas Cromwell and Mary, Queen of Scots, among the most horribly botched in history. When she went to the electric chair on this day in 1953, the standard three jolts proved insufficient to kill her; she took four and a half minutes to die.

Her husband, Julius, had been unproblematically dispatched minutes earlier – further fuel for the prevalent theory that Ethel was the stronger and more wilful of the couple. It seems likelier, however, that as the chair in Sing Sing prison was not designed with women in mind, she did not fit into the equipment properly. If so, it was the last of many occasions in her life when she fell foul of gender stereotypes.

The Rosenbergs had been convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage in 1951. The crucial testimony came from Ethel's brother, David, a machinist working on the Manhattan Project, who confessed that he had given Julius atomic data to pass on to the Soviet Union, and then changed his story 10 days before the Rosenbergs' trial to implicate Ethel too. Having sealed his sister's fate, he spent a mere nine and a half years in prison.

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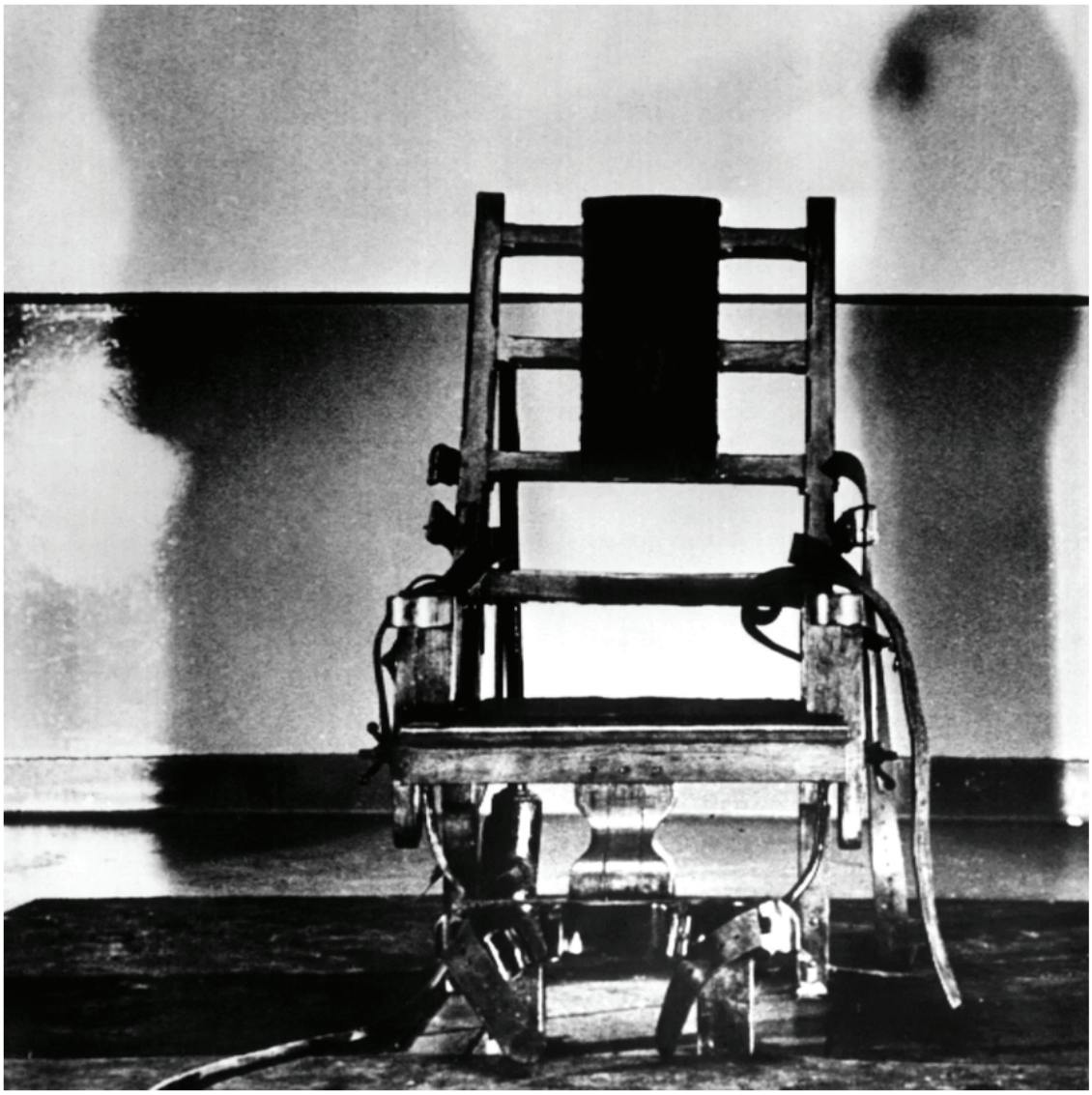
Even so, Ethel, according to her brother's testimony, had not done much more than type up the secret information he gave to Julius. The explanation of how this stenographical crime resulted in a death sentence lies, according to this new biography by Anne Sebba, in a mixture of "Reds under the bed" hysteria and standard 1950s chauvinism.

As Sebba puts it, Ethel was "too proud or naïve to look the part of a weak and helpless woman" at her trial; her attempts to be stoical made her come across as flinty. She wore frumpy clothes, and gladly sported the terrible hats that her adoring fellow inmates at the Women's House of Detention had crocheted for her.



Ethel Rosenberg took four and a half minutes to die in this electric chair in Sing Sing Prison | CREDIT: Everett Collection Historical / Alamy

The consensus grew that somebody so unfeminine must be a termagant; had probably, in fact, strong-armed poor Julius, three years her junior, into becoming a spy. It was on these grounds that President Eisenhower refused to commute her death sentence to life imprisonment: "She has obviously been the leader in everything they did in the spy ring."

Sebba argues, however, that there is no evidence to suggest Ethel was involved in her husband's espionage activities in any way. Her fatal mistake was to fall out with her brother and his wife, Ruth, over various trivialities, with the result that they were happy to exaggerate her complicity in exchange for lenient treatment – as David admitted not long before his death in 2014.

Sebba, well known for her biographies of Wallis Simpson and Mother Teresa, makes the case for the defence with exemplary clarity, and that Ethel was as remarkable a woman as any of her previous subjects. Born into a poverty-stricken, non-intellectual Jewish immigrant family in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1915, Ethel had the grit to make something better of her life. Blessed with a beautiful soprano voice, she longed to be an opera singer, but accepted the necessity of working as a shipping clerk – only to risk her job by leading strikes.

Her insistence on doing what she believed was right, rather than what was expected, reached its apotheosis in her refusal to testify against her husband. One of the high points of the book is Sebba's tender portrait of a marriage that, contrary to public opinion, was based on mutual devotion and esteem. "Julie, you're a low-down son of a b----. But you're the luckiest man in the world because no man ever had a woman who loved him that much," observed a guard, as Ethel sang to Julius in the courtroom cells after they were found guilty.

Sebba does sometimes overdo things in an effort to paint Ethel in as favourable a light as possible. "Quite possibly it was an accident," she writes of Ethel's second pregnancy, "but more likely it was a reaffirmation of their mutual love." Sebba cannot really know which is the "more likely" of those two options; her sympathy has led her into sentimental speculation. It's hard not to nod along with most of Sebba's arguments, though, and few readers will end up disagreeing with Jean-Paul Sartre's conclusion that Ethel was a "human sacrifice", killed as a senseless response to the panic that seized the US as the Soviets' atomic weapons programme gathered pace.

Sebba gets her readers under the skin of both Ethel and her era so effectively that this shameful saga had me alternately close to tears and boiling with rage. She is right to identify this as a uniquely despicable episode in US history, although she might have made the point that this is perhaps a good thing: the regime Julius spied for was happy to dispatch a dozen people no less innocent than Ethel every day.

But still, there is something hauntingly horrible about this affair, and the hypocrisy of the devious lawyers, self-satisfied judges, sanctimonious journalists, overzealous FBI men and backside-covering politicians who directed their combined might against Ethel in the name of freedom. You come away from this book fervently hoping that her ingenuous face haunted the dying moments of every one of them.

Ethel Rosenberg: A Cold War Tragedy is published by W&N at £20. To order your copy for £16.99, call 0844 871 1514 or visit the Telegraph Bookshop