Review: Executing the Rosenbergs: Death and Diplomacy in a Cold War World

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Reviews


Lori Clune’s analysis of the global response to U.S. government propaganda efforts against alleged pro-Soviet spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg during the early 1950s is an excellent addition to the historiography of the early Cold War, and a fine teaching resource for college classrooms. Students and faculty alike should benefit from Clune’s treatment of what she convincingly argues to be one of the most misunderstood episodes of the Cold War.

Executing the Rosenbergs puts to bed the notion that the main concern for students of the case is whether the Rosenbergs committed the crimes for which they were accused, found guilty, and ultimately put to death. Instead, Clune looks at domestic politics, domestic and foreign propaganda efforts, and the response of people worldwide in showing that the Rosenberg case was about more than just a matter of guilt or innocence. Her main argument is that the perception of reality, rather than reality itself, was more important to both advocates for the death penalty and protesters contending that the Rosenbergs were innocent or, at the very least, should not be put to death. With the benefit of newly discovered State Department documents, seemingly tucked away to avoid scrutiny by those seeking to challenge the federal government’s case against the Rosenbergs, Clune shows the breadth and depth of global protest movements, clearly demonstrating that even conservatives in some European nations—most notably in France and Italy—ultimately condemned the Rosenbergs’ execution. In all, Clune contends that U.S. efforts to convince the public that the executions were necessary largely worked at home, but failed abroad. She shows that the executions left a legacy of global distrust of U.S. foreign policy that far preceded Washington’s recent blunders in the Middle East, or even earlier in Vietnam.
College professors will find *Executing the Rosenbergs* useful because it can be applied in many contexts. The book is fertile ground for students to learn how propaganda influences our assumptions about the nature of guilt and innocence. It is also a good tool for debate: Clune does not think the Rosenbergs were innocent, but rather that the punishment did not fit the crime. This will resonate with some students, but not others. A key for more thoughtful analytical use in the classroom will be, as Clune does, to go beyond the question of the Rosenbergs’ guilt. Legal students will find value debating what some may consider the flaws in the judicial system that Clune expounds upon. Students of foreign policy and propaganda, meanwhile, will benefit from Clune’s new evidence showing the global spread of protest against the executions and the concern among State Department ambassadors, consular officials, and in Foggy Bottom itself about alienating non-U.S. public opinion. Graduate students, in particular, will benefit from Clune’s brief discussion of her research trajectory. All readers will like that Clune’s narrative takes just 167 pages before endnotes, a brevity which is admirable in a discipline where historians (the reviewer included) tend to overwhelm the reader with information. Yet Clune still manages the difficult task of writing a thrilling, yet substantive history, interweaving multiple narrative threads in a key chapter of the early Cold War.

For propaganda scholars seeking more, however, future study of global opinion of the U.S. should pick up where Clune left off and more deeply analyze non-U.S. public opinion both for and against the executions. Follow-up work on this important topic might demonstrate, for example, whether the Rosenberg protesters were representative of mass public opinion, and draw more empirical connections between these protests and future rallies against U.S. foreign policy. A very small criticism of the book that may hamper teachers, meanwhile, is the small size of the maps at the beginning and end of the book highlighting the global spread of protests and pickets at U.S. embassies and consulates. The map on page 162, for example, features cities with documented anti-execution protests, but the print denoting the countries and the stars highlighting the cities are in some cases so small as to be nearly indiscernible. Teachers could use this shortcoming as an opportunity, however, to have students construct their own maps of protest, or at the very least to post a map of protests on a PowerPoint at the front of the classroom. In all, however, these are minor quibbles that do not dramatically affect what is not only an outstanding book, but also a timely one. Today, just as in the aftermath of the executions, warnings about the pervasion of “truthiness” in history and memory is particularly relevant.