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“Never Losing Faith”: an analysis of the National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case, 1951-1953*

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Introduction

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested by the FBI in July-August 1950, put on trial in March 1951, and received the death sentence in April 1951. Their electrocution two years later, on 19 June 1953, was without precedent in peacetime American history. Although the actual charge, under the Espionage Act of 1917, was conspiracy to commit espionage, the widely held view, then and now, was that the Rosenbergs – or at least Julius – were “atom bomb spies” who provided the Kremlin with *the* secret of the bomb and thereby committed, in J. Edgar Hoover’s striking phrase, “the crime of the century”. Defenders of the Rosenbergs maintained that their sentences resulted from a flagrant miscarriage of justice and their deaths constituted legal murder.

The widespread shock and outrage, and the elevation of this event into a *cause célèbre* of the Cold War, was due, in no small measure, to the efforts of the National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case (hereafter, Rosenberg Committee), formed on 10 October 1951. This article examines that committee: its genesis, its myriad activities, the sources of its support, the extent of communist domination, and the vexed issue of anti-Semitism. It will not revisit the well-trodden historiographical ground concerning the extent of the Rosenbergs’ guilt, the judicial irregularities of their trial, the protracted appeals processes, the hostile political environment in which the committee’s campaign was fought, or the international response. But in providing the first scholarly analysis of the Rosenberg Committee, the article will restore to that committee its agency and rescue it from historical amnesia.

When the Rosenberg Committee has been referred to, usually fleetingly, in the extensive literature on the Rosenberg case,¹ the usual assertion is that it was a “front” for the CPUSA;

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indeed, this assumption has become axiomatic. The earliest and most extreme instance of this characterization was outlined by Fineberg, who insisted that the pro-Rosenberg

Losing Faith”, derives from a letter Julius Rosenberg sent to Emmanuel Bloch – “I’ve never lost faith that we’ll be delivered from this death house” (*National Guardian*, 20 December 1951, 2) – and became the title of a booklet published after their deaths.

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¹ That literature, in chronological order, includes: Oliver Pilat, *The Atom Spies* (New York: Putnam, 1952); Solomon Andhil Fineberg, *The Rosenberg Case: Fact and Fiction* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1953); William Reuben, *The Atom Spy Hoax* (New York: Action Books, 1955); John Wexley, *The Judgment of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg* (New York: Cameron and Kahn, 1955. 2nd ed. 1977); Malcolm P. Sharp, *Was Justice Done? The Rosenberg-Sobell Case* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1956); Nathan Glazer, *A New Look at the Rosenberg-Sobell Case* (New York: Tamiment Institute, 1956); Jonathon Root, *The Betrayers: The Rosenberg Case – A Reappraisal of an American Crisis* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1963); Alvin H. Goldstein, *The Unquiet Death of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg* (New York: Lawrence Hill, 1975); Robert and Michael Meeropol, *We Are Your Sons: The Legacy of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975); Walter and Miriam Schneir, *Invitation to an Inquest* (New York: Pantheon), 1983 [1st ed. 1965]; Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton, *The Rosenberg File: A Search for the Truth* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983); Ilene Philipson, *Ethel Rosenberg: Beyond the Myths* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1988); Joseph H. Sharlitt, *Fatal Error: The Miscarriage of Justice that Sealed the Rosenbergs’ Fate* (New York: Scribner, 1989); Virginia Carmichael, *Framing History. The Rosenberg Story and the Cold War* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Marjorie Garber and Rebecca Walkowitz (eds), *Secret Agents: The Rosenberg Case, McCarthyism, and Fifties America* (New York: Routledge 1995); John Neville, *The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War* (Westport: Praeger, 1995); Alexander Feklisov and Sergei Kostin, *The Man Behind the Rosenbergs* (New York: Enigma, 2001); Sam Roberts, *The Brother: The Untold Story of Atomic Spy David Greenglass and How He Sent His Sister, Ethel Rosenberg, to the Electric Chair* (New York: Random House, 2001); Emily Arnow Alman and David Alman, *Exoneration: The Rosenberg-Sobell Case in the 21st Century* (Seattle: Green Elms press, 2010); Walter Schneir, *Final Verdict: What Really Happened in the Rosenberg Case* (New York: Melville House, 2010). I have not included the numerous scholarly articles, many in law journals, dealing with the case.

“cadres” were “Communist manipulators making capital out of two poor wretches” on whose behalf “the Communists had little difficulty marshalling a Red and Pink Backing”.² More recently, Weinstein and Vassiliev maintain that the clemency campaign was “spearheaded by Communist-dominated ‘defense committees’”³ and Radosh argues that the “campaigns to gain clemency for the Rosenbergs had been created directly in Moscow from the very start”.⁴ Communist complicity was certainly asserted at the time. Some indicators: Irving M. Engel, chairman of the Jewish Defense Appeal, called the decision to form the Rosenberg Committee “a Communist Party manoeuvre”;⁵ Chet Huntley of the American Broadcasting Company, alleged that the Rosenberg Committee was “in service to the Soviet Union”;⁶ the *New York Times* referred to the “Communist-organized” Rosenberg Committee;⁷ the *Washington Post* to a 24-hour vigil outside the White House marching to the “drumbeat of Communist propaganda”;⁸ the government attorney James B. Kilsheimer III referred to the campaign as “undoubtedly Communist inspired”;⁹ the FBI “tentatively selected” the Rosenberg Committee for registration, as a “Communist-front organization”, under the Internal Security Act of 1950;¹⁰ the State Department’s Psychological Strategy Board reported that it was the “Communist apparatus run by the USSR” that launched the pro-clemency campaign;¹¹ and underpinning HUAC’s investigation of the Rosenberg

² Fineberg, *The Rosenberg Case*, 47, 51, 55.

³ Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev, *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in American – The Stalin Era* (New York: Random House, 1991), 333.

⁴ Ronald Radosh, “A Tale of Two Trials: Soviet Propaganda at Home and Abroad, *World Affairs Journal*, May-June 2002, 4 <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/tale-two-trials-soviet-propaganda-home-and-abroad>. Fifty years earlier Radosh accompanied Ben Goldring to a “theater rally” for the Rosenbergs in Palm Garden, NYC. Benjamin and Muriel Goldring Papers TAM.374, Box 9, Folder 14, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, New York [hereafter Tamiment].

⁵ Cited in *National Guardian*, 4 April 1952.

⁶ Text of address, 3 December 1953, Sobell Records, Box 26, Folder 3.

⁷ *New York Times*, 15 February 1953.

⁸ *Washington Post*, 6 January 1953.

⁹ *New York Times*, 31 December 1952.

¹⁰ FBI Report, Director FBI to SAC, New York, 30 September 1952, FBI file.

¹¹ Cited in Lori Clune, “Great Importance World-Wide: Presidential Decision-Making and the Executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg”, *American Communist History* 10:3 (2010), 270.

Committee in 1955 by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) was the *a priori* belief that it was a communist creation.¹² Soon after, HUAC cited the Rosenberg Committee and every one of its 42 local affiliates as subversive organizations organized “for the purposes of international communism”.¹³ Generally, this view – even when stripped of its lurid Cold War rhetoric – has been accepted rather than scrutinized.

I will argue that the involvement of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) in the Rosenberg case commenced well after the Rosenberg Committee was established; that it never became a “front” for the CPUSA, as alleged; that Radosh’s argument that Moscow’s machinations, from the outset, explain the clemency movement is wrong; and that, in fact, the party tried to thwart the committee’s operations and activities until the end of 1952. I will further suggest that the Rosenberg Committee was more akin to Gramsci’s notion of an organization of “organic intellectuals” that eschewed top-down Stalinist control. The CPUSA’s apparent *volte face* will also be examined in the context of the Slansky show trial in Czechoslovakia.

The *National Guardian*

Interest in the Rosenberg case was first aroused when, in early July 1951, the *National Guardian*, a limited-circulation, left-wing New York weekly, commissioned William A. Reuben to write a series of investigative articles on the case.¹⁴ It did this after the Rosenbergs’ lawyer, Emmanuel (“Manny”) Bloch, met with James Aaronson, one of the *Guardian*’s editors. Bloch persuasively argued that the *Guardian* should publish the

¹² United States House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities, *Investigation of Communist Activities (The Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case and Affiliates) Hearings*, 84th Congress, 1st Session, 2-5 August 1955, Parts I & II (Washington DC, 1955); see 2179-2239 for testimonies of Emily and David Alman.

¹³ *Trial by Treason: The National Committee to Secure Justice for the Rosenberg and Morton Sobell*, House Committee on Un-American Activities Report, Washington, DC, August 1956, 118; *Guide to Subversive Organizations and Publications*, Committee on Un-American Activities, U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, DC, January 1957, 60.

¹⁴ The *National Guardian*, which commenced publication in 1948, consciously chose a political line independent from the CPUSA; see Cedric Belfrage papers, TAM.143, Box 3, Folder 5; Box 9, Folder 6, Tamiment.

Rosenbergs' side of the case: "The way he took the case to his own heart was startlingly un-lawyer-like. I was sorely troubled."¹⁵ Bloch had already visited the offices of the Communist Party's *Daily Worker*, in vain. William Reuben had the right credentials: he was a war veteran, ex-director of public relations for the American Civil Liberties Union, ex-contributing editor of *Pageant* magazine, editor of the United Jewish Appeal yearbook, and a feature writer for the New York *Daily Compass*. So on 15 August 1951, in an editorial entitled "Is this the Dreyfus Case of Cold War America?", the *Guardian* announced that it would begin an exposé of the case similar to that it conducted three years earlier on the Trenton Six case.¹⁶ Then, Reuben worked on that case and his reports helped mobilize a movement that, successfully, campaigned for the defendants' innocence; now, it was hoped, history would be repeated. Because the government case left "such reasonable doubt of the Rosenbergs' guilt", the *National Guardian* told its readers, that "we are confident that you will act, as you did in the Trenton Six case, to win vindication for these young American parents."¹⁷ The first of Reuben's seven articles on the Rosenberg trial appeared on 22 August; the final on 3 October 1951.¹⁸ Indeed, the first of the countless publications of National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case (hereafter Rosenberg Committee), of which Reuben was the provisional chairman, was a 32-page pamphlet *To Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case*, which contained all of Reuben's articles.¹⁹

¹⁵ Cedric Belfrage and James Aaronson, *Something to Guard: The Stormy Life of the National Guardian 1948-1967* (New York: Columbia University press, 1978), 170; James Aaronson, *The Press and the Cold War* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), 59. As Aaronson saw it, "unless an independent and unencumbered newspaper like the GUARDIAN would take up the case, Ethel and Julius would go to their deaths...without a murmur of protest".

¹⁶ In 1948 six African-American young men from Trenton, New Jersey, were convicted of murder and sentenced to death. In 1951, after a series of legal appeals and a public campaign on their behalf, four were acquitted and two spared the electric chair.

¹⁷ *National Guardian*, 15 August, 1.

¹⁸ Copies of these articles are in several collections, but see William A. Reuben Papers, TAM.289, Box 12, Folder 50, Tamiment [hereafter Reuben Papers].

¹⁹ A copy of the booklet is located in Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives, UWM MSS 213, Box 3, Folder 4. For a summary of each of these articles, see Neville, *The Press*, 59-63. See also William Reuben, "What was the Rosenbergs' 'Crime'?", *Jewish Life*, December 1951, 21-3. Reuben's analysis of the trial record was further developed in his *Atom Spy Hoax*, 327-405. According the Rosenbergs' elder

The *Guardian's* readership in 1951 was approximately 75,000. Two of its readers were David and Emily Alman. Inspired by Reuben's exposure of the prosecutorial and judicial misconduct at the Rosenbergs' trial, by their unequivocal moral objection to the death penalty, by their close reading of the trial transcript, and by an earlier "brief conversation on a park bench" in Knickerbocker Village between Emily and her neighbor, Ethel Rosenberg,²⁰ they – with the support of Reuben – formed the Rosenberg Committee on 9 October 1951.²¹ It was tiny, they met in the Almans' apartment every Wednesday, and it was bereft of funds. But after the *Guardian* inserted an advertisement requesting "enlistment" in the committee and a pledge of funds "to bring the facts of the case to a wider audience", money and support began to trickle in and, soon, escalated. This was supplemented by hundreds of letters to "Dear Friend" that Reuben wrote to potential sympathizers in mid-October 1951.²²

The Rosenberg Committee

The executive secretary of the Rosenberg Committee was David Alman, a 32-year old novelist.²³ He had been a communist in his youth, but left the CPUSA when the Nazi-Soviet pact was signed in 1939. He remained on the fringes of the Left helping, for example, the

son, Michael Meeropol, Reuben continued to believe in the Rosenbergs' complete innocence, even after the Venona decrypts (declassified by the National Security Agency from 1995) clearly implicated Julius in an espionage ring. Conversation with Michael Meeropol, New York City, 23 October 2012.

²⁰ Alman and Alman, *Exoneration*, 161.

²¹ One of the very first donors (enclosing \$1 in cash) was the future eminent historian of American race relations, Dr Herbert Shapiro; see Shapiro to Reuben, 12 October 1951, Committee to Secure Justice for Morton Sobell Records, 1946-1969, MSS 7, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives (hereafter Sobell Records), Box 26, Folder 6. Shapiro had previously contributed to a legal defense fund for the Trenton Six.

²² See Sobell Records, Box 26, Folder 6; Reuben Papers, Box 11, Folder 20, Tamiment. It was not for another three months that its formation was announced by the CPSU; see *Daily Worker*, 3 January 1952, 3.

²³ Before 1951, he had published *American Fountain* (1936), *The Hourglass* (1947) *The Well of Compassion* (1948), and *Jacob Nadir* (1950).

lawyer O. John Rogge draft a speech for the 1948 Progressive Party Convention.²⁴ His wife, Emily, a 29-year old social worker, had never been a Party member, and became the committee's treasurer.²⁵ The substantive chairman of the committee was Joseph Brainin, a publicist and veteran fund-raiser for several "establishment" Jewish organizations. He was a creative and independent thinker, who, like the Almans, eschewed interference by *all* governments in the lives of their citizens. Although he once wrote a guest editorial for *New Masses*, he was too iconoclastic to ever consider becoming a communist.²⁶ The infant Rosenberg Committee was disproportionately Jewish in composition: Norma Aaronson, a typesetter and local resident; Louis Harap, the editor of *Jewish Life*; Don Rothenberg, an activist in the Democratic Party and veterans' organizations; Aaron Schneider, a union organizer in the retail and office trades; Peggy Strauss, an executive in a clothing firm and the only Committee member with a regular income; Yuri Suhl, a poet and novelist; and William Wolf, a sports writer and reporter for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. Only Harap was a member of the CPSU. As Alman put it, "We were not a Committee of Very Important Persons. We were unquestionably insular. All of us were Jewish, with bonds of common experience and history".²⁷ The committee's assets consisted initially of \$100, a borrowed old mimeograph machine, and a single copy of the 2600-page trial record, which all had read. It had no office, no telephone, and "no certainty that our audience – the general public – would respond sympathetically".²⁸

In the opening months of 1952, William Reuben began addressing small meetings in hotels and community halls across America's Midwest under the heading of "Is This the American Dreyfus Case?" and under the auspices of the American Progressive Party. Admission was

²⁴ Personal correspondence with David Alman, 25, 27 August 2012.

²⁵ For her 2004 obituary see <http://knickerbockervillage.blogspot.com.au/2009/08/david-and-emily-alman-of-10-monroe.html>

²⁶ Joseph Brainin, "What FDR means to a Jew", *New Masses*, 17 October 1944, 22-3. Brainin was then an editor of *New Currents* and an associate editor of *The Protestant*. His son was adamant that he never joined the CPUSA. Personal correspondence, David Brainin, 16 October 2012.

²⁷ Alman and Alman, *Exoneration*, 22.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

free but donations were solicited.²⁹ The FBI noted that Reuben's attempt on 17 March to speak the Jewish Section of the International Workers' Order convention in Pittsburgh was unsuccessful because its leader, Morris Steinburg, a member of the CPUSA, declared himself "too busy".³⁰ The Rosenberg Committee, meanwhile, focused on distributing Reuben's *To Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case*, travelling to Washington (on 5 January) to form a local committee, and writing hundreds of letters to "Dear Friends" both within the United States and overseas.³¹

Its first major effort to mobilize opinion was a public meeting on Wednesday 12 March 1952 at Pythian Hall.³² Despite the mainstream press refusing to accept advertisements for the meeting, and the late cancellation of the first-booked meeting hall, approximately 1500 hundred New Yorkers travelled to 135 West 70th Street and paid their sixty cents admission fee to hear "The Truth About the Rosenberg Case", as the meeting was billed in one press release.³³ The meeting lasted three and a half hours; was addressed by eight speakers, with

²⁹ One flyer advertised four 8 p.m. meetings in one week: Reuben papers, Box 11, Folder 20. See his "Outline for Rosenberg Speech" for the themes he repeatedly covered: Reuben papers, Box 12, Folder 47. Permission to use one Jewish synagogue in Chicago, Temple Judea, was cancelled at the last minute, under apparent pressure from the American Legion: *National Guardian*, 13 February 1952, 4. In April 1952 Reuben travelled to the West coast and triggered the formation of local Rosenberg Committees in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Reuben papers, Box 12, Folder 50.

³⁰ FBI report, 19 April 1952, 2, "National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case", FBI File, "National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case", File No. 100-15241, FOIPA No. 1197746-000. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent references to FBI documents are from this vast 27,000-page file.

³¹ See, for example, Joseph Brainin to Harold Rich, Sydney, 9 January 1952; Brainin to Vincent Toledano, Mexico City, 9 January 1952: Reuben Papers, Box 3, Folder 7; Box 17, Folder 6. Each letter concluded: "We beg of you in the name of Justice, and Freedom and Righteousness and Peace, to organize actions in behalf of the Rosenbergs".

³² Owned by a Roman Catholic fraternal organization, the Knights of Pythias, the hall was secured by committee member, Aaron Schneider, through his contacts with middle-level Catholic leaders.

³³ Reuben Papers, Box 12, Folder 47, Tamiment. Such press releases, although frequent, were exercises in futility. Of the very few who managed to present the Rosenbergs' case on behalf of the committee, two were highly prominent nuclear physicists: the Nobel Prize winners, Dr Harold C.

further messages read out from several unable to attend (including a personal “death house” letter from Ethel Rosenberg); and raised \$5000. According to one report, the audience was “moved to tears” during the address given by Helen Sobell – wife of Morton Sobell, imprisoned for thirty years for his complicity in espionage – and “a rising salute” when she finished. As an FBI informant commented, “[the] audience seemed enthusiastic throughout the meeting”. Finally, the meeting resolved to adopt an *Amicus Curiae* (friend of the court) brief being prepared by the Rosenberg Committee for submission to the Supreme Court, appealing for a review of the case, and called on Attorney General James McGrath to consent to a new trial.³⁴

Expansion of the Committee

The success of the Pythian Hall meeting energised the Rosenberg Committee. After numerous rejections, it found an office (initially 246 Fifth Avenue; later 1050 Sixth Avenue), employed a full-time secretary, opened a bank account, and issued further appeals:

Form a Rosenberg Committee in your city, town or community. Arrange for public meetings on the case. Send letters to local newspapers, give them news releases of your activity, take paid ads wherever possible. Every form of public appeal must be used.³⁵

Not surprisingly, New Yorkers were the most responsive: informal networks and word-of-mouth meant that subsidiary committees were soon established in Astoria, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Lower East Side, Upper West Side, and Washington Heights/Inwood. By the time the executive secretary reported to committee members on 30 April 1952, much had been

Urey (letter to *New York Times*, 30 December 1952, 8 January 1953) and Albert Einstein (*New York Times* 13 January 1953). It was Urey who persuaded Einstein to lend his support.

³⁴ The above is drawn from Cablegram, SAC [Special Agent in Charge] Scheidt, New York to Director, Washington, 13 March 1951, pp. 1-3, and Report to Director and Assistant Attorney General, 17 March 1951, pp. 1-4, FBI file; Leaflet, “The Truth About the Rosenberg Case”, FBI File; Letter, Alman to “Dear Friend”, 15 March 1952, Box 11, Folder 20, Sobell Records; *National Guardian*, 19 March 1953. No reports of the meeting, described by Alman as “historic”, appeared in any of the New York daily newspapers despite, apparently, reporters being present.

³⁵ Letter, Alman to “Dear Friend”, 15 March 1952, Sobell Records, Box 11, Folder 20.

accomplished. Over two dozen local committees were established across the country, 35,000 signatures to the *Amicus Curiae* brief were obtained, and 400,000 pamphlets were distributed.³⁶ However, the national committee remained chronically short of funds. The \$12,000 it borrowed to print a thousand copies of the court record meant it had no reserves for further legal fees, paid advertisements, financial support for the up-keep of the two Rosenberg children, printing new pamphlets or reprinting existing material. The overwhelming number of donations – the correspondence files of the Rosenberg Committee bulge with letters from supporters attaching money – were small, often as little as one dollar. There was no “Moscow Gold”. By mid-August 1952, after calling for \$25,000 “to bring the truth to the public”, less than \$5000 was received.³⁷ In late November, “[w]e need not tell you how desperately we need your financial help”.³⁸ In December, “On the virtual eve of the threatened execution, we are financially unable to operate. Please help us”.³⁹ By February 1953, the committee’s funds were completely exhausted.⁴⁰ Only dedicated sympathizers, it seemed, were prepared to pay the ten dollars for the set of eight volumes (1800 pages) of the entire record of the Rosenbergs’ trial, which the committee – notwithstanding the objections of Manny Bloch and other attorneys – believed was the best means of persuading the public of the need for a new trial and, therefore, garnering more signatures for the *Amicus* petitions.⁴¹ (Ultimately, Manny Bloch was paid \$21,474.90, which

³⁶ David Alman, “Progress in campaign to secure justice in the Rosenberg case”, 30 April 1952, Sobell Records, Box 24, Folder 6. In the end, an astonishing six million leaflets and pamphlets were sent from the National Office alone. Emily Alman, “The Lessons of the Rosenberg case”, report to the National Officers, Rosenberg-Sobell Committees, 11 October 1953, Sobell Records, Box 21, Folder 3 [hereafter Emily Alman, “Lessons of the Rosenberg case”].

³⁷ Alman to “Dear Friend”, 15 August 1952, Sobell Records, Box 17, Folder 6.

³⁸ Alman to “Dear Friend”, 22 November 1952, *ibid.*

³⁹ Undated letter (December 1952), Alman to “Dear Friend”, Sobell Records, Box 19, Folder 4.

⁴⁰ Alman to “Dear Friend”, 12 February 1953, Sobell Records, Box 17, Folder 7. “No appeals to the courts, no vigils, no demonstrations, no leaflets can be made without money. Get every cent in immediately”.

⁴¹ Alman to “Dear Friend”, 16 July 1952, Sobell Records, Box 17, Folder 6. As Alman acknowledged, “We know that the price is high...[but] if it helps reveal the truth and save lives, it may not be such a high price to pay”. Alman to “Dear Friend”, 22 July 1952, Sobell Records, Box 17, Folder 6; Reuben

hardly compensated the fate that befell him: after the Rosenbergs were buried, he was divorced, the Bar Association of NYC initiated disciplinary action to disbar him, and on 30 January 1954 he was found dead in his bathroom.⁴²)

The Committee and the FBI

The unprecedented action in publishing the trial record, and the increasing success in “reaching the people”⁴³ (even if the financial resources of “the people” were limited) by the summer of 1952, alarmed J. Edgar Hoover. He had already completed a three-part series for the *Reader’s Digest* entitled “The Crime of the Century”; according to one sympathetic commentator, it contained “spine-chilling details of this fearful crime”.⁴⁴ As early as 15 January 1952, Hoover instructed the New York office “to institute an investigation” into the Rosenberg Committee and submit an investigative report.⁴⁵ Informants collected leaflets, identified recipients of posted literature (on whom existing FBI files were retrieved or new files opened⁴⁶), and compiled personal details on the Almans. It was, initially, deeply concerned to learn from a Rosenberg Committee press release (6 May 1952) that a U.S. Army Brigadier General, Henry C. Newcomer, supported the Committee and its call for a

papers, Box 5, Folder 19. This was the first time that the Rosenberg Committee and Manny Bloch disagreed, sometimes vehemently; see, for example, *New York Times*, 14 February 1953.

⁴² *New York Times*, 20 January 1954; 31 January 1954. He was aged 52. The disciplinary action stemmed from a speech he made at the Rosenbergs’ funeral at which he claimed his clients had been “murdered”.

⁴³ David Alman, “Progress in campaign to secure justice in the Rosenberg case”, 30 April 1952, Sobell Records, Box 24, Folder 6.

⁴⁴ *Washington Post*, 11 April 1951, 11.

⁴⁵ Director, FBI to SAC, New York, 15 January 1952, FBI File.

⁴⁶ A file was opened on Mary Lee Emerson, who in 1947 was a committee member of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in Birmingham, Alabama, because another committee member, Malcolm Dobbs, was “a known communist”. The “Dear Friend” letter and accompanying pamphlet, addressed to Emerson, was wrongly delivered to T.F. Kemp, who contacted the FBI. SAC, Birmingham to Hoover 13 February 1952, FBI File. Another file was opened on Elsie B. Reeves, the wife of a suspected Baltimore communist; she was described as “nervous and high strung, eccentric” and “consistently wears a tam [bonnet].” Memorandum, SAC, Baltimore to Director, FBI, 30 September 1952, FBI File.

new trial, and a report on him was forwarded to J. Edgar Hoover.⁴⁷ One FBI informant visited the Manhattan office of the committee with offers of “assistance”, and another worked alongside volunteers folding leaflets; s/he observed that there was “considerable singing”, that most of the songs were “Hebrew spirituals” and that one white volunteer sang “with an all-colored choir”.⁴⁸ In addition, thanks to a “confidential informant” at the Chase Manhattan bank, the FBI ascertained the dates and precise amounts of deposits.⁴⁹

The first of numerous FBI investigative reports was written on 7 March. Compiled by Special Agent John A. Harrington, it was nineteen pages long and was based on information gleaned by eight informants. Three pages consisted of license numbers of cars in the vicinity of a pro-Rosenberg meeting on 9 January. Under the sub-heading, “Communist Party Support”, all that was ascertained was that the CPUSA “might have some interest in the Committee” and that one Committee member was assessed by T-6 (confidential informant of “known reliability”) as a “fellow traveler” of the Communist Party.⁵⁰ The absence of evidence of communist involvement was confirmed by SAC Scheidt.⁵¹ Similarly, the San Francisco later reported that “there has been no evidence of CP activity in regard to the Rosenberg case in this area”.⁵² However, in what was to become a regular pattern, a

⁴⁷ FBI Report (author: Howard Fletcher Jr.), 26 June 1952, 1-5, FBI File. However, once it was learnt the General was 91 years of age, and after alerting the Criminal Division of the Department of Justice, it was decided not to pursue the matter further.

⁴⁸ Memorandum, SAC, WFO to Director, FBI, 1 May 1952, 3, FBI File.

⁴⁹ Cablegram, SAC Scheidt to Hoover, 27 March 1952, FBI File. The Almans believed that, after several banks refused to do business with the committee, the FBI actually *enabled* the Chase Manhattan to open an account in order to “keep an eye on our income and expenses”. Alman and Alman, *Exoneration*, 179.

⁵⁰ Report, “National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case”, 7 March 1952, FBI File. On 1 April, a copy was sent to the Criminal Division of the Department of Justice, which had “indicated a definite interest in the activities of this committee”. Memorandum, 26 March 1952, FBI File.

⁵¹ SAC, New York, to Hoover, 7 March 1952, FBI File.

⁵² Cablegram, FBI, San Francisco to Hoover, 21 April 1952, FBI File.

subsequent memorandum issued a directive to find “any indication that the CP is actively engaged in directing, sponsoring or controlling [Rosenberg] committee”.⁵³

Other organizations and outlets had far less difficulty identifying communist manipulation of the Rosenberg Committee, even in the early, struggling months of its existence.

Counterattack, the weekly publication of American Business Consultants Inc., bluntly stated that the committee was a “front set up by CP to direct agitation and propaganda”; that the Pythian Hall meeting was intended to “whip up support for the Communist Party’s campaign” on behalf of the Rosenbergs; and that the committee “peddles inflammatory, divisive propaganda to “further [the communists’] own ends”.⁵⁴ More vitriolic was the long, ornately printed poem published by the Pentagon Patriots, based in Washington D.C., “Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, Traitors to the U.S.A., Must Die”, in which the Rosenbergs’ supporters were allegedly “In league with ‘Reds’ to give our land/ To Moscow’s savage, bloody hand”.⁵⁵ In response to the Pythian Hall meeting, the normally liberal *New York Post* editorialized that the Rosenberg Committee was “a thinly-disguised Communist front”.⁵⁶

Role of the Communist Party

⁵³ Memorandum, SAC, New York, to Hoover, 7 March 1952; Hoover to SAC, New York, 28 March 1952, FBI File.

⁵⁴ *Counterattack*, 28 March 1952 [1-2], in American Business Consultants, Inc Counterattack: Research Files, TAM.148, Box 28, Tamiment.

⁵⁵ Copy in Sobell Records, Box 24, Folder 7. For comment, see *Daily Worker*, 16 May 1952. In a similar vain but less poetic was the graffiti written on the wall of the men’s toilet in April 1952 of the New York to Washington express train: “KEEP TRAITOR JEWS OUT OF THE COUNTRY REMEMBER TRAITOR JEWS ROSENBERGS. Similarly, small anti-Rosenberg stickers (“DANGER AHEAD -- Red Traitors at Work”) were pasted up on public buildings in the city of Boston in June 1952.

⁵⁶ Cited in *National Guardian*, 26 March 1952. See also the correspondence between the popular *New York Post* columnist, Oliver Pilat, and author Nelson Algren (Rosenberg Committee), 3 March 1952, 7 March 1952. Alman wrote to Algren: “Thanks for the Pilat correspondence. Strange that his name should be Pilat. Maybe he’s a relative of Pontius Pilate, in which case he can claim some sort of hereditary qualification for crucifying people”. Alman to Algren, 31 March 1952, Sobell Records Box 5, Folder 4.

But was the Rosenberg Committee communist-inspired or a communist “front” organization? This is a crucial question because of its historiographical depiction, because of the contemporaneous implications, and because of its key role in this defining episode of Cold War espionage. We already have seen how only one member of the original committee was a communist and how a communist leader of the International Workers’ Order was unwilling to assist William Reuben, but the evidence for CPUSA disinterest in, if not outright opposition to, the Rosenberg Committee is more compelling.

None of the four “cooperative” witnesses at the HUAC hearings into the Rosenberg Committee in August 1955 testified that the CPUSA had been instrumental in establishing the Rosenberg Committee or that any funds collected were directed to the party. This did not deter HUAC from reaching the opposite conclusion in its report.⁵⁷ If we accept the veracity of David Alman’s recollection – and there seems no reason to doubt it – the CPUSA was not only uninvolved but sought actively to undermine the committee. Alman recalled how, in late 1951, a CPUSA leader (possibly William Patterson, whom he knew and respected) “was pressed by others in the CP leadership to do a dishonorable thing. He came to see me and asked that the Rosenberg committee disband.”⁵⁸ He elaborated on this in 2010:

Shortly after the *National Guardian* carried news of the Committee’s formation, emissaries from the CPUSA called on Committee members to urge that they disband, arguing that the Attorney General would label the Committee a Communist organization and that its challenge to the fairness of the trial would create the impression that the “Communist” Committee was defending spies and traitors. This, in turn, would reflect badly on the CPUSA.⁵⁹

Very recently, Alman, in private correspondence, was more explicit:

⁵⁷ United States House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities, *Investigation of Communist Activities (The Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case and Affiliates) Hearings*, 84th Congress, 1st Session, 2-5 August 1955, Parts I & II (Washington DC, 1955).

⁵⁸ Correspondence, Alman to author, 18 September 2012.

⁵⁹ Alman and Alman, *Exoneration*, 181.

As for the role of the CP, in the fall of 1951, when the NCSJ was formed, the CP did its best to abort it... After boycotting the clemency campaign for over a year, the CP discovered that our little committee of 12 ordinary men and women had roused several thousand Protestant ministers, a few hundred rabbis, and many thousands of Americans to obtain, by then, nearly a million petitions for a new trial or clemency...[So] in the winter of 1952 when it became apparent to the CP leaders that the rank and file were visibly supportive of the NCJS, and some European countries, notably France and Italy, were sprouting large-scale Rosenberg protests, the CP leadership decided to participate.⁶⁰

The wariness of the CPUSA towards the Rosenberg Committee is also suggested in a FBI report in April 1952. A party leader, Gus Hall, imprisoned under the Smith Act, spoke with Morton Sobell, imprisoned under the Espionage Act; both were inmates of the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn. An informant reported that Hall

did not believe the Party was in favor of making appearances under the circumstances. HALL stated that he did not think these meetings called by the [Rosenberg Committee] would do either Sobell or the Rosenbergs any good, but on the contrary would probably prove harmful.⁶¹

The “circumstances” to which Hall referred were, presumably, the series of savage Smith Act prosecutions. They did not end with the trial of the CPUSA’s top officials in 1949, but continued into 1950-51 with “second string” prosecutions. The party was decapitated, its organizational apparatus was in disarray, and most members were preoccupied with political survival. It was experiencing, to use William Patterson’s words in August 1951, “a nightmare of terror unleashed in recent weeks and gaining greater fury with each passing day”.⁶² From the party’s perspective, therefore, the defense of the Rosenbergs was, at best, a

⁶⁰ Correspondence, Alman to author, 30 April 2013.

⁶¹ FBI report, 17 April 1952, “National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case”, 6, FBI File.

⁶² CPUSA Records, TAM.132, Box 98, Folder 14. Patterson, an African-American communist, was writing as the national executive secretary of Defense Fund for Civil Rights, a Civil Rights Congress initiative in response to the Smith Act prosecutions.

luxury it could not afford; they must become “casualties”.⁶³ The preoccupation argument was shared by William Reuben. As his reply to a private question from the *New York Post*'s Oliver Pilat stated,

Why the Daily Worker does so little for the Rosenbergs? I can't figure that one out either....Without being familiar with their thinking about the Rosenberg case, I would imagine that they have their hands full right now with the trial of the 17 Communists that is to begin here this month.⁶⁴

In addition, it is arguable that the party feared, at least until mid-1952, that Julius Rosenberg might confess, as Harry Gold and Klaus Fuchs had done. In that event, other Soviet agents in the US would be named and the CPUSA would be implicated. Such an explicit identification with treason and espionage posed real dangers. Distancing was essential. When the Rosenbergs refused to cooperate and maintained their innocence, the decision, subsequently, to defend a couple who had chosen martyrdom became far easier. As the high-ranking chairman of the CPUSA's Cultural Commission, Victor Jerome, allegedly whispered to a trusted comrade, “They're heroes. They're going to their death and not saying a word”.⁶⁵ It is little wonder, then, that Emily Alman – who herself was told by an emissary from the Party leadership that “she was not to do the Rosenberg thing”⁶⁶ – was critical of the Party's “secrecy and deviousness” in relation to the Rosenberg campaign.⁶⁷

⁶³ Cited in Alman and Alman, *Exoneration*, 173 (this quote appeared only in the 2009 draft version of the book; copy in the Tamiment). One communist memoirist refers to the “hydraulic pressure” of this period, which may explain his fleeting and incidental reference to the Rosenbergs. Al Richmond, *A Long View from the Left: Memoirs of an American Revolutionary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 327.

⁶⁴ Reuben to Pilat, 7 January 1952, Reuben Papers, Box 26, Folder 6.

⁶⁵ Interview with John Gates, 14 June 1978, in Radosh and Milton, *Rosenberg File*, 328.

⁶⁶ Cited in Radosh and Milton, *Rosenberg File*, 327.

⁶⁷ Alman and Alman, *Exoneration*, 210.

The Rosenberg Committee, therefore, was not conceived or controlled by the CPUSA. It was ignored not only by the capitalist press but also by the communist *Daily Worker*.⁶⁸ It was grounded in local communities, such as in the Bronx. Arguably, it was a movement, (as will be discussed below) of grass-roots “organic intellectuals”. It was genuinely open and democratic – unlike the majority of the Party’s “front” organizations. Its appeal to supporters to attend a meeting “to go over our problems in relation to our many activities” and to “plan our work together” was not uncommon. Nor was it an empty platitude, for “[a]s always, we turn to you for counsel, guidance and confirmation”.⁶⁹ Earlier, Joseph Brainin wrote: “We need the advice of those friends who have been laboring with us for the past nine months”.⁷⁰ Later, Alman wrote: “We want your advice [regarding a clemency delegation to Washington in January 1953]. What do you think? Let us know as soon as possible”.⁷¹ This was not, therefore, an exclusive organization. Despite the extensive surveillance by the FBI there is no hint of hidden, let alone conspiratorial, activity, as was later alleged by HUAC.⁷²

However, it cannot be denied that CPUSA support for, activity in, and a desire to dominate, the Rosenberg Committee sharply increased from the end of 1952. The reasons for this will be discussed below. Until then, the FBI tried in vain to assemble a portrait of communist-

⁶⁸ The mainstream press *did* cover the Rosenberg case, but did so in a selective, highly jaundiced and often inflammatory manner. See Cherie Lewis, “Coverage of the Rosenberg Case, May 20-June 22, 1953”, Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism, Maryland, 2 August 1976; Arlene Tyner, “The Press and the Execution of the Rosenbergs”, Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Journalism Historians Association, Philadelphia, 3 October 1991. From early 1953, according to Neville, the American press engaged in “cold-war gatekeeping” and moved the clemency campaign “onto the American news agenda as an anti-communist story”. Neville, *The Press*, 86, 107.

⁶⁹ Undated letter and dated letter (19 January 1953) from Aaron Schneider to “Dear Friend”; letter from David Alman to “Dear Friend”, 9 September 1952, Sobell Records, Box 24, Folder 8; Box 26, Folder 13.

⁷⁰ Brainin to “Dear Friend”, 30 August 1952, Sobell Records, Box 19, Folder 4.

⁷¹ Alman to “Dear Friend”, 15 January 1953, *ibid*.

⁷² *Trial by Treason: The National Committee to Secure Justice for the Rosenberg and Morton Sobell*, House Committee on Un-American Activities Report, Washington, DC, August 1956; *Washington Post*, 27 August 1956.

controlled organization. Throughout 1952, memoranda such as the following were sent frequently to J. Edgar Hoover:

...all active security informants in this division [Cincinnati] have been alerted to report any activity on the part of the CP or any of its members in support of the subject organization [Rosenberg Committee]. No information has been received from these informants indicating that any CP members or the CP itself is active in support of this organization...⁷³

This directly contradicts a subsequent report that HUAC investigators found that “in virtually every area the Rosenberg campaign was initiated and conducted by members of the Communist Party”.⁷⁴ At best, informants (often of “known reliability”) reported that individuals “known to this office as CP members” attended pro-Rosenberg meetings.⁷⁵ These informants were kept busy: by the time of the Rosenbergs’ executions, hundreds of these meetings had been held. The FBI also relied on a legion of unsolicited letters, usually addressed to the Director, identifying the names of local Rosenberg supporters as being, potentially, members of the CPUSA. Many of these letter writers offered their services in the provision of additional information as it came to their notice; occasionally, Hoover “hope[d] that you will not hesitate to communicate with me again”.⁷⁶

⁷³ SAC, to Director, FBI, 18 September 1952 (there was certainly a committee in Cincinnati: Sobell Records, Box 5, Folder 9, and that committee was addressed by David Alman six months earlier); see also very similar memos, SAC New York to Director, FBI, 7 March 1952, SAC Indianapolis to Director, FBI, 10 June 1952, FBI File.

⁷⁴ Edmond Le Breton, “Rosenberg Agitation Called Red Triumph”, *Washington Post*, 27 August 1956, 19.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Howard Fletcher’s 18-page FBI Report from Washington D.C., 30 April 1952, and W. Hershel Caver’s FBI Report, Richmond Va. Division, FBI, 21 July 1952, in which a total of only three “known” communists were identified in both cities as having attending meetings that formed local Rosenberg Committees.

⁷⁶ Hoover to Reverend Carl C. Stump, 17 November 1952, FBI File. As was customary in the compilation of such files, newspapers reports were also another source of intelligence. Much was made, for example, of an investigative article by Ogden Reid in the *New York Herald Tribune* entitled “The Red Underground”, which (incorrectly) attributed propaganda efforts on behalf of the

What also emerges from the voluminous FBI files on the Rosenberg Committee is the increasing number of *rank and file* communists who, either in ignorance or defiance of the official party position cooperated with the Rosenberg Committee.⁷⁷ This became an issue, according to Alman, in late 1952, when both the Rosenberg Committee and the communist-controlled American Labor Party held separate meetings in New York's Union Square. A sizable part of the audience listening initially to communist speakers deserted that meeting and crossed over to hear about the Rosenbergs. This minor incident is symptomatic not only of the growing support for the Rosenbergs' cause but also of the *absence* of cooperation between the Rosenberg Committee and the CPUSA – a feature overlooked when the American and international clemency campaign are referred to.

Czechoslovakia and the Slansky trial

It was only after December 1952 – well over a year since the Rosenberg Committee was formed – that the CPUSA threw its considerable resources behind the Rosenbergs. The turning point was a disconnected and dissimilar event in Europe. In that month, after a show-trial in November, eleven leading officials of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party – eight of them Jewish – were hanged in Pankrác prison, in Prague. Another three communist leaders of Jewish origin received life sentences. Most prominent of the accused were the general secretary, Rudolf Slansky, and his foreign minister, Vladimir Clementis. On 9 December, six days after the executions, the French communist leader, Jacques Duclos, connected the Rosenberg trial in the United States with the Slansky trial in Czechoslovakia. His widely publicized statement read: “The conviction of U.S. atom spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg was an example of anti-Semitism, but the execution of eight Jews in

Rosenbergs to the CPUSA; see Hoover to James M. McInerney (Assistant Attorney General), 8 April 1952.

⁷⁷ Californian communists traditionally exercised a degree of independence from the New York head office; a “CP Club meeting” decided that “the next issue to be dwelt upon by the Party after election is the Rosenberg case”. Cablegram, FBI Los Angeles to Director, FBI, 5 November 1952, FBI File. Several rank and file Detroit communists, according to unnamed “former Communist Party District 7 member”, attended a public meeting at the Jewish Cultural Center in Detroit in August 1952; see FBI Report (Mahlon E. Coller), Detroit, Michigan 14 November 1952, 1-3, FBI File.

Czechoslovakia last week was not”.⁷⁸ Soon after, the *Daily Worker* and the *National Guardian* followed suit.⁷⁹ Given that the term “Jewish bourgeois-nationalist” was explicitly used by the sentencing judge,⁸⁰ this was a highly disingenuous conclusion.

This article has challenged those historians, commentators and government officials who have argued that the Rosenberg Committee was little more than a communist “front”. However, it does not take issue with those who suggest the CPUSA’s change of heart was associated with the notoriously anti-Semitic Slansky trial.⁸¹ There is ample evidence to suggest that the coincidence in timing between sudden communist interest in the Rosenberg case and the treason trial in Czechoslovakia was not accidental, and that the first was pursued to provide an antidote to Western revulsion over the second. Solomon Fineberg, a member of the New York Board of Rabbis, put it the most bluntly: “to diminish world-wide wrath about the Prague trails, the Communists leaped aboard the Rosenberg

⁷⁸ Cited in Robert B. Glynn, “L’Affaire Rosenberg in France”, *Political Science Quarterly* 70.4 (1955), 509. The evidence of ideological anti-Semitism underpinning the purges in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union from the late 1940s to the “Doctors’ Plot” of January 1953 is indisputable. Studies include Meir Cotic, *The Prague Trial: The First Anti-Zionist Show Trial in the Communist Bloc* (New York: Herzl Press, 1987); George H. Hodos, *Show Trials: Stalinist Purges in Eastern Europe, 1948-1954* (New York: 1987); Arkady Vaksberg, *Stalin Against the Jews* (New York: Knopf, 1994); Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Maumov (eds.), *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Jonathan Brent and Vladimir Pavlovich Naumov, *Stalin’s Last Crime: the Plot Against the Jewish Doctors, 1948-1953* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); Ann Applebaum, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944-1956* (New York: Doubleday, 2012), ch. 12.

⁷⁹ James Aaronson, “The Facts on the Prague Treason Trials”, *National Guardian*, 18 December 1952.

⁸⁰ American Jewish Committee, *The Anti-Semitic Nature of the Czechoslovak Trial* (New York, 1952), 20-21.

⁸¹ See, for example, Fineberg, *The Rosenberg Case*, 10, 55-7; Radosh and Milton, *The Rosenberg File*, 348-50; Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev, *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in American – The Stalin Era* (New York: Random House, 1991), 333; John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *Early Cold War Spies: The Espionage Trials that Shaped American Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 175-6. This view was also adhered to at the time at a meeting of Justice Department officials; see memorandum of conversation, 12 December 1952 (declassified FOIA file), in Benjamin and Muriel Goldring Papers TAM.374, Box 10, Folder 4, Tamiment.

train”.⁸² Such interest, indeed, was stimulated, coordinated and mobilised by communist parties across both Western and Eastern Europe from late 1952.⁸³ In rallying behind the Rosenbergs, it is also arguable that Stalin wished to deflect potential disquiet within the communist parties themselves over this second round of brutal purges.⁸⁴ The former Czechoslovak Communist Party leaders, all veterans of the Spanish Civil War, had numerous friends and supporters in the international communist movement. Two days before their execution, Stalin sealed their fate. “Every Jewish nationalist”, he told a meeting of the Politburo on 1 December 1952, “is an agent of the American intelligence service”.⁸⁵ There was no need to refer to Slansky by name.

Using vitriolic language borrowed from the Kremlin, the CPUSA alleged that the former Czech Communist Party general secretary, the Foreign Minister, Vladimir Clementis, and their twelve collaborators – the “worst kind of enemies of the people” – were part of a Zionist/Trotskyist/Titoist plot linked to Jewish international bankers and other reactionaries to “wreck and plunder” Czechoslovakia, restore capitalism, destroy the Communist Party and “carry out espionage” for the governments of Israel and the United States. Further articles appeared, detailing more “revelations” of the conspiracy between Czech Zionists and British and American intelligence services, and exposing “all the lies” about anti-Semitism in the trial; to that end the comments of the Chief Rabbi of Czechoslovakia, Dr Gustav Sicl, were enlisted.⁸⁶ The underpinning reasons for the Czech

⁸² Fineberg, *Rosenberg Case*, 57.

⁸³ Radosh and Milton, *Rosenberg File*, 347-8.

⁸⁴ For example, the American Jewish communist writer, Howard Fast, who renounced communism in 1957, claimed that the hangings in December 1952 caused increasing “uneasiness” and forced him to ask how anti-Semites “could hold office in a socialist country”. Cited in Gerald Sorin, *Howard Fast: Life and Literature in the Left Lane* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 254. Similarly, an Australian communist also of Jewish origin, found the Eastern European show trials “hard to explain, even to myself”, but acquiesced to the official line that they were “necessary”. Bernie Taft, *Crossing the Party Line* (Newham, Vic.: Scribe, 1994), 75.

⁸⁵ Cited in Helen Rappaport, *Joseph Stalin: A Biographical Companion* (Westport, Conn.: ABC-CLIO, 1999), 297.

⁸⁶ *Daily Worker*, 17 December 1952. The chief rabbi’s comments were based on an interview with a British communist journalist, Sam Russell.

trial do not concern us here.⁸⁷ Suffice it to say that the bizarre charges, the public confessions and the quick executions mirrored the Soviet purges and show trials of the 1930s, and the CPUSA faithfully echoed the Moscow line.

Anti-Semitism and the Jewish Question

Those writers who have asserted, correctly, a causal connection between CPUSA official interest in the Rosenberg case and the show trial in Prague, have also claimed, incorrectly, that allegations of anti-Semitism in the Rosenberg trial began to be made in order to divert attention from the allegations of anti-Semitism in the Slanksy trial. In fact, the issue of anti-Semitism had been consistently raised by the Rosenberg Committee well before the Slanksy trial. As one FBI informant, who visited its New York office and who gained the confidence of the administrative staff, reported in April 1952, the Committee had “decided with respect to their future efforts on behalf of the Rosenbergs to stress the theory that the Rosenbergs were prosecuted because they were ‘Jewish’. Further, that the question was being forcefully presented”.⁸⁸ In April, too, 500 copies of an article by Rabbi Louis Gross sharply critical of Judge Kaufman from the 14 March 1952 issue of the *Jewish Examiner* were distributed.⁸⁹ In May 1952 the committee produced a two-page *Fact Sheet on Anti-Semitism in the Case: Newspaper Comment*, in which Jewish newspapers across America were cited in support of the argument that anti-Semitism *did* play a part.⁹⁰ At numerous public meetings throughout June 1952, Jewish speakers (Yuri Suhl, Rabbi Meyer Scharff, Ephraim Cross and others), emphasized the anti-Semitic features of the Rosenberg case.⁹¹ In its early months, the committee (which, as we have seen, was exclusively Jewish at the outset) targeted rabbis, Jewish organizations and – drawn from the telephone book – individuals with Jewish-

⁸⁷ See, in particular, Igor Lukes, “The Rudolf Slanksy Affair: New Evidence”, *Slavic Review* 58.1 (1999), 160-87; Igor Lukes, *Rudolf Slanksy: His Trials and Trial*, Cold War International History Project Working Paper #50 (Washington DC, 2006); Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (London: Bodley Head, 2009), 214-6.

⁸⁸ Confidential internal memorandum to Director, FBI, 16 April 1952, 1. Already, an early Rosenberg Committee member, Louis Harap, had written a controversial editorial, “Anti-Semitism and the Rosenberg Case”, *Jewish Life*, January 1952.

⁸⁹ FBI Report (author: John A. Harrington), New York, 5 June 1952, 7, FBI File.

⁹⁰ Reuben papers, Box 11, Folder 20.

⁹¹ FBI report (author: John A. Harrington), 21 August 1952, 3-5, FBI File.

sounding names. The Northern Californian Rosenberg Committee posted 3,700 letters to “Jewish individuals in the SF Bay area”.⁹² The FBI received countless outraged letters from anti-communist Jewish recipients of Rosenberg Committee letters and propaganda material. One read: “My reason for writing & sending this darn stuff is because I firmly believe its all Communistic propaganda and I think the F.B.I. should investigate this Committee. I happen to be of Jewish origin.”⁹³ This was symptomatic of the divisions within American Jewry over the Rosenberg case. At a meeting in St Louis, Missouri, Alman, spoke (allegedly) “with a bit of contempt” about conservative Jews, such as Judge Kaufman, who “bent over backwards” to show that many Jews were anti-communist.⁹⁴

On the other hand, because the Rosenbergs were Jewish, Jews were regarded by the Rosenberg Committee as a more sympathetic source of moral and financial support. One letter, from Ben Bach, state secretary of the New Jersey Rosenberg Committee, was pointed: “You, as a Rabbi, will be concerned with the fact that the judge, himself a Jew, publicly injected his affiliation with the synagogue into the matter and thus made it appear that in dealing out death he acted in accordance with the tenets of Jewish religious concepts of justice”.⁹⁵ Particular effort was made to secure the consent of prominent Jews to have their names appear on the letterhead of letters mailed to thousands of Jewish individuals. Two rabbis agreed to write booklets published by the Rosenberg Committee: Rabbi Sharff, *A Statement on the Rosenberg Case*, and Rabbi Abraham Cronbach, *Mercy for the Rosenbergs*.⁹⁶ Of course, a great many other Jewish organizations and community leaders resisted all entreaties from the Rosenberg Committee. Anxious for respectability and integration into the American mainstream, and aware of how anti-Semitism and espionage could become entwined, such organizations such as the Jewish Community Council (JCC) and the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith (ADL), sought to distance themselves from the case. The

⁹² Cablegram, SAC San Francisco, to Director FBI, 18 June 1952, FBI File.

⁹³ Hilda Vogel (nee Goldstein) to FBI, Washington, 30 April 1952, FBI File.

⁹⁴ Memorandum, SAC St. Louis to Director FBI, 29 May 1952, FBI File Rosenberg Committee.

⁹⁵ Bach to “Dear Rabbi”, 6 August 1952, Sobell Records, Box 19, Folder 4. See also Joseph Gingold to “Dear Rabbi”, 18 September 1952, Sobell Records, Box 19, Folder 4. Rabbis were also telephoned directly by members of the Rosenberg Committee to secure their cooperation and/or publicize the Rosenberg case sympathetically from their pulpits. .

⁹⁶ Copies in both Sobell Records, Box 48, Folder 5, and FBI File.

JCC pressured Jewish groups to withdraw permission previously granted to local Rosenberg Committees to hold meetings in their halls; the ADL, which had a self-proclaimed “excellent relationship” with the FBI,⁹⁷ wrote to all Jewish groups warning against supporting “any meetings or attempts to develop pro-Rosenberg sympathy” in their area.⁹⁸ As the Los Angeles chairman of the American Jewish Congress told a cottage meeting (attended by a FBI informant), the Rosenberg case had “stirred up considerable turmoil among the Jewish population”.⁹⁹

One of the very few leading communists willing to campaign for the Rosenbergs was the Jewish writer, Howard Fast. In April he asked: “Can the Jewish people in America avoid asking why a Jewish prosecutor and a Jewish judge were assigned to the case? Can they avoid asking why the first peace-time death sentence for espionage in all the history of the United States was reserved for these two people who are Jews?”¹⁰⁰ In September he addressed a public meeting in Newark, New Jersey, calling for a new trial. ¹⁰¹ In December he co-organized a “clemency train” from Manhattan to Ossining, where, in the driving rain, a noisy rally of 750-800 supporters was held, speeches were made and the “Star Spangled Banner” was sung. Fast stated that the Rosenbergs were victims of an anti-Semitic backlash. A small contingent, including Fast, and overseen by 200 police, was permitted to place a floral wreath outside the gates of the nearby Sing Sing prison half a mile away; the sash on the wreath read “Greetings to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg from the People”.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Benjamin R. Epstein, ADL national director, to L. Nichols, FBI, 2 April 1952, FBI File.

⁹⁸ Detroit Committee for the Rosenbergs, “Open letter to the members of the Jewish Community Council”, May 1952, Sobell Records, [reel 3]; Memorandum, Arnold Foster (secretary ADL) to ADL Regional offices, 28 February 1952; Memorandum, Director, FBI to Assistant Attorney General, 20 March 1952; FBI File.

⁹⁹ Cablegram Los Angeles office to Director, FBI, 20 August 1952, FBI File. See also Edward S. Goldstein: Jewish Labor Committee Research Files, WAG.232, Box 1, Folder 38 (“American Jewish Congress and Communists”), Tamiment; FBI Report (author: Thomas E. Bryant), Los Angeles, 27 August 1952, 6, FBI File.

¹⁰⁰ Howard Fast, “Save the Rosenbergs!”, *Masses & Mainstream*, April 1952, 49.

¹⁰¹ Leaflet, Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives, UWM MSS 213, Box 3, Folder 4.

¹⁰² *Daily Worker*, 22 December 1952. One of those present was “Confidential Informant T-3”; see FBI Report (author: John A. Harrington), 3 February 1953, 22-3, FBI File. This action was organized not

So all (but the last) of these appeals, activities and contributions connected to the Semitic and anti-Semitic dimensions of the Rosenberg case, predated the Slanksy trial and therefore had nothing to do with deflecting the anti-Semitism inherent in that trial. If diversion were the main motive for the CPUSA's embrace of the Rosenbergs' cause, it was a motive consistent with Soviet foreign policy goals, not with domestic humanitarian impulses. From the beginning of 1953, it is more accurate to see the relationship between the CPUSA and the Rosenberg Committee as one of convergence, not one of domination/subordination. Alman pondered this issue in a private document in March 1953. He believed that supporters of the Rosenbergs "cannot be lumped together into one indistinguishable group". In emphasizing the diverse and ecumenical character of his committee, he referred to five different groups of supporters, each with their own priorities and objectives. The communists, he maintained,

have their own reasons for supporting clemency. I do not know whether it is more valuable to the communists and from their point of view, to have the Rosenbergs dead rather than to keep them alive....[O]ne may hold that they are not really interested in the case for clemency for its sake and that they urge it on grounds that if they (the communists) support clemency it will not be granted, thereby furthering their own ulterior purposes.¹⁰³

So Alman (and, arguably, the core members of the Rosenberg Committee) did not view the CPUSA through rose-colored glasses. To assume their support or even acquiescence to the party line – a distinguishing feature of the "front" organization – is to deny their agency. David and Emily Alman or Joseph Brainin or Aaron Schneider were nobody's dupes. And as we have seen, for the first fourteen months of its existence, the Rosenberg Committee was not, officially, supported by the CPUSA; the party's political shift did not mean organizational control. The injection of the party's vast resources, networks, energy and propaganda apparatus in the first six months of 1953, which provided FBI informants with

by the Rosenberg Committee but by the Civil Rights Congress, which had just published the 47-page booklet, *Cold War Murder. The Frame-up Against Ethel and Julius Rosenberg* (TAM.132, Box 148, Folder 4).

¹⁰³ "Clemency in the Rosenberg Case" 24 March 1954, Sobell RecoredBox 5, Folder 12.

apparent prima facie evidence that the Rosenberg Committee was a communist outfit, undoubtedly extended the scope and reach of the clemency campaign. We will now turn to the final months before the death sentence was enacted to get a glimpse of the committee's activities – activities that, to repeat, the CPUSA fully endorsed and assisted but, as the internal committee records make abundantly clear, did not instigate.

Activities of the Rosenberg Committee, 1953

Throughout the first half of 1953, an astonishingly wide range of flyers, leaflets and brochures were produced and distributed in their hundreds of thousands.¹⁰⁴ Also disseminated were copies of the weekly *Rosenberg Newsletter*, which provided updates on both recent news and dates and details of proposed actions. The first, from the Los Angeles (LA) area committee, appeared on 27 February 1953; soon after the New York and New Jersey offices published their own.¹⁰⁵ They were punchy, illustrated and instantly readable. The third issue of the *LA Newsletter* suggests the flavor, as well as the accomplishments:

BAY AREA: Some 80 Rosenberg Committees are functioning. Each committee works its own field: trade union, church, political youth. The list is long and the response from people never reached before is inspiring. House meetings, phone campaigns, forums – these are some of the actions being taken to spark the clemency drive in the bay area...

WEST HOOLWOOD-BEVERLY HILLS AREA: Having house parties with speakers. An active musicians group being set up. We have had great success with chain-letter idea...

U.C.L.A.: 3,000 leaflets have been distributed on the campus. Plan table for signing letters and telegrams. A FORUM arranged in Royce Hall for 2,000 students....¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Copies of these are held in various boxes in the Sobell Records but can also be found in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives: UWM MSS 213, Box 7, Folder 4; and the Tamiment library: TAM.PE 036 ORGS Box 62; and TAM.132, Box 111, Folder 8 and Box 119, Folders 8 & 9.

¹⁰⁵ See Sobell Records, Box 26, Folder 8.

¹⁰⁶ *Rosenberg Newsletter*, Volume 1, Number 3, March 12, 1953, Sobell Records, Box 26, Folder 8.

This report highlights the profound changes in levels of support, organizational structures and self-belief that occurred over a twelve month period. In contrast, a report from the same Los Angeles committee for the period January-March 1952 noted:

[W]e had no money, no sponsors, no speakers, no hall, not even a name for the committee, not even a headquarters...all work and telephoning was done from my home. I couldn't type and had no typewriter for someone else to use...We had gotten no publicity ---NOTHING!!¹⁰⁷

To chronicle the extent and variety of activities conducted by the Rosenberg Committees in 1953 is impossible within the constraints of this article. Suffice it to say that they included large public rallies (including two at the outdoor Triborough Stadium at Randall's Park, which attracted 10-12,000) and street corner meetings¹⁰⁸; the provision of advice and infrastructural support for the establishment of Rosenberg committees both nationally (David Alman went on speaking tours in late February and mid-May 1953, during which briefcase was stolen in Baltimore and its contents copied by the FBI¹⁰⁹) and overseas (Joseph Brainin spent two months in Europe in early 1953); the mobilization of tens of thousands of individuals to write letters, send telegrams and sign one of the thirty petitions and *Amicus Curiae* briefs seeking a retrial; the printing and distribution of three editions of the complete transcript of the Rosenberg *Trial Record*, and hundreds of thousands of leaflets and pamphlets (such as the widely-distributed 16-page *New Evidence in the Rosenbergs Case*, which focused on new revelations about the David Greenglass's perjured

¹⁰⁷ Sophie Davidson, "Report of the Los Angeles Committee to the Midwest Conference, Chicago, August 17, 1952", 1-2, Sobell Records, Box 5, Folder 4. The same report is contained within an FBI Report (author: John A. Harrington), 3 February 1953, 16-20, FBI File.

¹⁰⁸ The Bronx Rosenberg Committee, chaired by the energetic Joseph Gingold, was especially active in holding corner street meetings: the FBI recorded that on 11 October, from 11 am until 5pm, eleven such meetings covering the neighborhood were held; cablegram, 15 October 1952, New York office to Washington, FBI files, Rosenberg Committee.

¹⁰⁹ The thief was "Confidential Informant T-4 of known reliability"; memorandum, SAC, WFO (100-25474) to Director, FBI, 15 September 1952; Report made by Howard Fletcher, Jr., Washington D.C., 30 September 1952, 6-7, FBI File.

testimony¹¹⁰; deputations to Department of Justice officials, congressmen and city councillors; the formation of occupationally-specific clemency committees (scientists, lawyers, clergymen, unionists, college students); a “Conference of Inquiry” with different panels (scientific aspects, legal aspects); the sending of countless letters soliciting donations and the receipt and processing of the responses;¹¹¹ the organization of picket lines outside the headquarters of the Democratic Party; the holding of house parties to popularize the issue and raise money for the cause; the insertion of aid newspaper advertisements and the issuing of press releases¹¹²; radio broadcasts¹¹³; and the production of a 16 mm black and white film and a 78 rpm vinyl record (entitled “Clemency for the Rosenbergs”, 28 minutes in length and “effective for open-air sound-truck meetings”¹¹⁴).

The unflagging, seemingly inexhaustible, efforts of just one individual (and he was not atypical) – the National Secretary, David Alman – are exemplified by one of his memos “to the field” in September 1952:

¹¹⁰ Copy in TAM.PE 036 ORG, Box 62, Tamiment Library. Although enraged at the time, “far more serious”, according to Alman, “was the FBI’s recruitment of our baby sitter and [her] presence in our apartment when both of us were away”. Alman to author, 14 August 2013.

¹¹¹ Of course, an unknown number of letters did not hit the mark. Monsignor Maurice S. Sheehy (Department of Religious Education, Catholic University) was “considerably upset” that he received a mimeographed letter from Brainin and Reuben along with a “Fact Sheet” and a flyer for a Washington meeting to be addressed by Reuben on 6 November 1952. He was “quite disturbed” that his name would be on a mailing list “for this type of literature” and handed it over to the FBI. Memorandum, L.L. Laughlin to A.H. Belmont, 4 November 1952, FBI File.

¹¹² All the press releases for 1952-53 are located in Sobell Records, Box 24, Folders 6-8. See also Reuben papers, TAM.289, Box 5, Folder 19. Nearly all were in vain, given the cloak of silence dropped over the Rosenberg Committee by the press.

¹¹³ These appealed to the heart as well as the head. One began: “Good Evening. My name is David Alman. I was a neighbor of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. Our children used to play together...”. It ended with “Write to President Eisenhower tonight”. Transcript of radio broadcast, 4 June 1953, WOL Washington, Sobell Records, Box 26, Folder 3.

¹¹⁴ Alman to “Dear Friend”, 28 January 1953, Sobell Records, Box 17, Folder 7.

New York City now has sixty local committees. I am personally anxious to keep in close touch with each of your groups and the work you are doing. Therefore I would suggest that:

1. you let me know when your individual committee plans to meet
2. you send me written reports of exact plans and undertakings – as well as the results
3. I will be available to come into your community any day between 1:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. – or meet you by appointment at any time
4. keep in touch with me by telephone – or drop into the committee headquarters whenever possible.¹¹⁵

The Rosenbergs and Organized Labor

The voluminous correspondence records of the Rosenberg Committee bulge with letters of support from innumerable individuals, groups and organizations. But there is one notable absentee: the labor movement. Despite efforts to enlist this traditional, and normally crucial, source of support for progressive causes, unions remained aloof. The Rosenberg Committee certainly acknowledged their importance: “The National Committee and the local committees recognized early in the campaign that without organized labor we would be unable to reach and move into action a most important segment of America”.¹¹⁶ A Labor Committee to Secure Clemency for the Rosenbergs was formed in January 1953, with Abe Weisburd its secretary. This committee wrote letters of appeal to trade union leaders (“Dear Brother”); organized delegations AFL-CIO leaders John Lewis and George Meaney; sponsored a “Labor Rally” at Palm Garden, NYC (a “historic spot of labor gatherings” at 310 West 52nd¹¹⁷) on 4 February 1953; issued numerous leaflets specifically aimed at unionists; and called on union officers and rank and file members to join the two mass delegations and vigils to the White House in February and June 1953.

¹¹⁵ Memorandum, National Office to “the Field” re “Rosenberg Week October 19 to October 26”, 16 September 1952, 3, Sobell Records, Box 24, Folder 7. The memo also recommends ten different forms of action with concrete suggestions for each.

¹¹⁶ Emily Alman, “The Lessons of the Rosenberg case”, 2.

¹¹⁷ Labor Committee Press release, 5 February 1953, Sobell Records, Box 24, Folder 6.

Despite exceptions – mainly in those unions where communist officials or cadres were already in positions of influence¹¹⁸ – despite disingenuous reports to the contrary,¹¹⁹ and despite the Rosenberg Committee employing four union organizers “to bring our case to the unions”,¹²⁰ the campaign to mobilize organized labor was largely a failure. Lists of locals and/or union officials supporting the clemency campaign were often fewer than two dozen, and were buttressed by statements of support from British, French and Italian peak union bodies.¹²¹ Evidence for the desultory response among unionists is oblique, but can be pieced together. A national committee report in August 1952 noted that “activity in the unions has been at a very slow pace”.¹²² The national office continued to receive letters such as this in early 1953: “I regret that no broad campaign has been developed in this area [Michigan], since my own fellow trade unionists do not seem to understand the relation of this case to their own destinies.”¹²³ A disappointed Weisburd wrote in February 1953, “Labor did not measure up to its obligations in the appeal for clemency”.¹²⁴ And significantly, a retrospective analysis of the Save the Rosenbergs campaign attributed, in part, its ultimate failure to inadequate union support: “We lacked the strength of organized labor, without which no great campaign can be won”.¹²⁵

In this failure we can see the strength of McCarthyism and the effectiveness of its anti-communist onslaught.¹²⁶ That onslaught predated McCarthyism but was emboldened by the

¹¹⁸ Mainly the CIO unions – the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union, the United Packinghouse Workers of America, the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, and the United Auto Workers.

¹¹⁹ “Unions throughout U.S. joining in plea to save the Rosenbergs”, *Daily Worker*, 15 January 1953.

¹²⁰ Emily Alman, “The Lessons of the Rosenberg case”, 4.

¹²¹ See, for example, “Labor Unions Call for Clemency”, and “Appeal for Executive Clemency”, TAM.132, Box 111, Folder 8; Sobell Records, Box 26, Folder 3.

¹²² “Report on the Midwest Conference”, Chicago, 17 August 1952, 3 Sobell Records, Box 17, Folder 7.

¹²³ Francis W. Murphy to New York office, 28 January 1953, Sobell Records, Box 14, Folder 6.

¹²⁴ Correspondence, Weisburd to Alman, 12 Feb 1953, Sobell Records, Box 17, Folder 7.

¹²⁵ Emily Alman, “The Lessons of the Rosenberg case”, 4.

¹²⁶ That onslaught sometimes had prosaic manifestations. When for example, Emily Alman attempted to recruit support from residents of Knickerbocker Village by holding a meeting in her

Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 and reached its peak when the Rosenbergs waited on death row. Traditional opponents of the labor left, including antagonistic employers and conservative opponents within the union movement,¹²⁷ were joined by the forces of the State, in the form of congressional committees, the FBI, federal government officials, the Subversive Activities Control Board and the IRS.¹²⁸ Communist-led unions were expelled from the CIO or their influence was drastically reduced; their leaders were subject to surveillance, investigation and the threat of sanction; their militant rank-and-file was reluctant to act on non-industrial, “political” issues; while their mainstream rank-and-file embraced the popular anti-communist consensus. In short organized labor was silenced, intimidated, tamed or had become acquiescent. Schrecker goes further: the political repression of the McCarthy period resulted in “the entire left wing of the labor movement [being] destroyed”.¹²⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, that at a regional meeting of the Rosenberg Committee in NYC on 28 March 1953, it was reported that “trade union leaders, even if they are inclined towards supporting clemency, are reluctant to declare themselves”¹³⁰ or that the following should occur:

home – “As neighbors of the Rosenbergs we must provide leadership” (Emily Alman to “Dear Friends”, 18 September 1952, Sobell Records, Box 17, Folder 6) – people were too afraid to attend. Both the Rosenbergs and the Almans lived in the same apartment block, Building G, 20 Monroe Street in 11E and 8 E respectively.

¹²⁷ See, for example, Harvey A. Levenstein, *Communism, AntiCommunism and the CIO* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1981), 104-9.

¹²⁸ See Ann Fagan Ginger and David Christiano (eds), *The Cold War Against Labor* (Berkeley: Meiklejohn Civil Liberties Institute, 1987), part 4; Ellen W. Schrecker, “McCarthyism and the Labor Movement: The Role of the State”, in Steve Rosswurm (ed.), *The CIO’s Left-Led Unions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 139-57.

¹²⁹ Ellen Schrecker, “Labor and the Cold War: The Legacy of McCarthyism”, in Robert W. Cherny et al (eds.), *American Labor and the Cold War: Grassroots politics and Postwar Political Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 7. Similarly, Aaronson commented that in these “frightening days of the early 1950s”, militant trade unionists were “struggling for survival”. James Aaronson, “The Left and the Rosenbergs”, *The Nation* 237:6 (3-10 September 1983), 162.

¹³⁰ Rosenberg Committee, *Rosenberg Newsletter*, #2, 8 April 1953, 1, Sobell Records, Box 28, Folder 8.

A longshoreman came into the office one day and during a long discussion pointed out that he could not use our trade union material. Sure, he said, I believe they [the Rosenbergs] are innocent – but if I said that to the men where I work today they wouldn't listen to another word I'd say.¹³¹

Picketing the White House

In 1953, there were at least two occasions at which the many disparate groups of supporters were physically brought together. The first occurred in the first weeks of January and resumed after President Eisenhower denied, on 11 February, executive clemency. The occurred second in June, after the Court of Appeals affirmed Judge Kaufman's denial of motion for new trial on 11 June and before the Supreme Court decision on 15 June declining to hear defense argument for a judicial review and denying a stay of execution. Both attracted national and international attention and both generated the most iconic and enduring imagery of the Rosenberg Committee's long campaign. These were the silent, perpetual vigils outside the White House in Washington. We will focus only on the second occasion.¹³²

Thousands of supporters were galvanized into action by urgent appeals, such as this:

It is late – BUT NOT TOO LATE – to save the lives of the Rosenbergs who are scheduled to die on June 18th. THEIR time is growing short, but you still have precious time to do something to save two lives...YOUR clock marks only the passing of everyday tasks and pleasure. THEIR clock merely counts sadness and grief.¹³³

A recommended response was to join the “clemency train” to Washington on Sunday 14 June. With approximately 5000 supporters expected in Washington, the logistics were

¹³¹ Emily Alman, “The Lessons of the Rosenberg case”, 2.

¹³² For preparations, organization and assessments of the first vigil, see Sobell Records, Box 13, Folder 8, Box 24, Folders 7-8, Box 26, Folder 9; Alman and Alman, *Exoneration*, 215-20; 222-24.

¹³³ Circular, New York Committee for Clemency for the Rosenbergs to “Dear Friend” [nd], TAM. 132, Box 111, Folder 9.

considerable.¹³⁴ The special train was chartered, and the cost of train tickets was heavily subsidized (\$5). It departed from Jersey City, NJ, at 8.30 am on Sunday 12 June, picked up participants along the way, and arrived at Union Station in Washington at 12.50 pm, along with chartered buses, in readiness for the beginning of the vigil at 1.30 pm. Because of the size of the crowd at Jersey City station, however, another two trains were hurriedly chartered by Aaron Schneider, the organizing secretary of the New York Rosenberg Committee. The Washington committee assumed a heavy organizational load: "If you bring your youngsters we will try to arrange places in Washington where they can rest and play while you see your congressmen".¹³⁵ The Washington committee also billeted some of the participants (who remained in Washington to continue the vigil) in private housing and provided advice on other, moderately priced rooms. "Although the Committee has very little money, it can help you in a limited way if you need money for your meals or fares or other vital expenses". Other participants flew in from cities across America and were joined by a delegation of mothers from Canada. All were subject to a degree of discipline: "Signs for participants will be supplied by the local committee. It is requested that no other signs be used. ...Please refer all requests for information from the newspapers or others to the committee office".

In what the Washington Deputy Chief of Police described as the largest picket line he had ever seen at the White House, nearly 7000 demonstrators assembled at 1.30 pm.¹³⁶ One group marched in a double line in front of the Executive Mansion; another, four deep, circled the block around the Treasury Department; and a third picketed the old State Department building. The placards they carried were not confrontational: "Pope Pius urges Clemency for the Rosenbergs", "New Evidence shows Perjury" and "The Electric Chair Can't

¹³⁴ The following is drawn from the Sobell Records, Box 19, Folder 4, Box 24, Folder 7, and TAM. 132, Box 111, Folders 8-9.

¹³⁵ The Washington Rosenberg Committee was established twelve months earlier. On 6 November 1952, for example, it held a successful mass rally at Odd Fellows Hall; speakers Reuben and Brainin; according to the FBI informant present more than 200 people attended. SAC, WFO to Director, FBI, 13 November 1952, FBI File. By mid-1953 it was fully-functional.

¹³⁶ The Rosenberg Committee claimed the figure was 13,000 ("a total arrived at by newsmen"), but some of the seventy policemen present used tabulators to count the pickets and totaled 6832; *Washington Post*, 15 June 1953.

Kill Doubts in the Rosenberg Case”. The same could not be said for a small counter-demonstration whose placards were ugly: “Sizzle ‘em. The Hot Seat for Traitors”, and “Hang ‘em. Ship the Bodies to Russia C.O.D.”. [CHECK FRONT COVER OF BOOK] This was not the only discordant note.

Excepting those designated to remain at the vigil, the demonstrators reassembled to the lawn opposite the National Archives in Constitution Avenue for a prayer meeting. There, they prayed with Rabbi Abraham Cronbach: “Lord, let the groan of the prisoner come before Thee. In the greatness of thy power deliver those who are condemned to die”. They also listened to – and many allegedly wept with – a distraught Sophie Rosenberg (Julius’ mother), beg Eisenhower to “not let my son and his sweet wife go to the electric chair”, if only “for the children’s sake”.¹³⁷ At 5 pm the children, Michael, 10, and Robbie, 6, accompanied their grandmother and the clemency supporters en masse back to the White House. According to one report, the “high point” of the day came when the two boys walked to the west wing of the White House and gave the guard a letter, written by Michael, to be forwarded to Eisenhower. It asked the President to “not let anything happen to my mommy and daddy”.¹³⁸ By this time, it was clear the Supreme Court had recessed without making a decision. By 7pm a special train was returning many of the demonstrators back to New York. A smaller number of stalwarts maintained the continuous 24-hour vigil and resolved to keep marching until clemency was granted or Ethel and Julius were executed.

Countdown to Execution

The final days of the Rosenbergs’ lives were feverish ones for the Rosenberg Committee. As late as 15 June 1953, four days before the executions, David Alman was still writing, “The Rosenbergs can be saved”, meetings were still being held, and petitions to the President

¹³⁷ One reporter described it as an “impassioned and largely incoherent plea”; *New York Herald Tribune*, 15 June 1953.

¹³⁸ Press release, Washington Office, Rosenberg Committee, 14 June 1953. The above is also based on a report in the *Washington Post*, 15 June 1953, 1, 5. Michael’s letter was primarily composed by Rosenberg Committee member, Aaron Katz. (Copy in Sobell Records, Box 26, Folder 9.) However, he was solely responsible for an earlier heartfelt letter (“...Please don’t let my parents die. My little brother and I need them and miss them...”) published in the *National Guardian* (19 December 1951). Personal conversation with Michael Meeropol, 23 October 2012.

were still being sent.¹³⁹ All the while, the White House vigil continued. supporters still believed that legal processes would rescue the Rosenbergs from the electric chair. Events now moved quickly. On Tuesday 16 June a new motion filed with Justice William O. Douglas argued that the death penalty in this instance was applicable only under the Atomic Energy Act, not the Espionage Act and therefore grounds for a retrial existed. On 17 June Douglas granted an indefinite stay of execution pending argument on this point. Hopes soared.¹⁴⁰ Those picketing the White House believed their vigil had become a victory celebration. But euphoria was quickly replaced by anxiety. Under pressure from the Department of Justice, Chief Justice Vinson quickly and controversially reconvened the Supreme Court to hear arguments. On 19 June the Court, with Justices Black, Douglas and Frankfurter heatedly dissenting, vacated the stay of execution and denied a motion for further stay to consider a new petition for clemency filed by defense attorney Bloch.¹⁴¹ Later that day, in defiance of a flood of international appeals¹⁴² and a spirited, cogent case presented in person by four ecclesiastic spokespeople (two Protestants, one Rabbi and one scholar) representative of 2300 clergymen,¹⁴³ Eisenhower for the second time refused to exercise executive clemency. The execution time was advanced from 11 pm to avoid conflict with the Jewish Sabbath and

¹³⁹ See Brainin to Eisenhower (with petition attached) 15 June 1953, Sobell Records, Box 5, Folder 11; for the scores of clemency petitions, see Sobell Records, Box 2, Folder 6. See also Dwight D. Eisenhower. Records as President, White House Central Files, 1953-1961, Alphabetical File Series, Boxes 2672, 2673 (letters from the general public re Rosenberg case), and Official File Series, Box 354, OF101-R (letters from clergy, congressmen etc).

¹⁴⁰ But not for a passenger on a New York-bound train who asked Arthur Douglas: "Are you the brother of the son-of-a-bitch who issued the stay of execution in the Rosenberg case?" William O. Douglas, *Go East, Young Man: The Early Years. The Autobiography of William O. Douglas* (New York: Random House, 1974), 23. The loyal brother hit the irate stranger in the mouth from which five teeth fell out.

¹⁴¹ For a detailed discussion of Douglass's stay and the Supreme Court's reversal, see Robert M. Lichtman, *The Supreme Court and McCarthy-Era Repression. One Hundred Decisions* (Urbana: Illinois University Press), 2012), 60-2; Radosh and Milton, *Rosenberg File*, 400-11; Schneir and Schneir, *Invitation to an Inquest*, 237-49.

¹⁴² Clune, "Great Importance World-Wide", 263-84;

¹⁴³ See Bernard M. Loomer, "A Mercy Call at the White House", *The Progressive* 17:9 (September 1953), 1-3, in Sobell Records, Box 48, Folder 6. Loomer, the Dean of the Divinity School, University of Chicago, was a prominent supporter of the Rosenberg Committee.

by 8.16 pm on Friday 19 June, both the Rosenbergs were dead. Just hours before she was electrocuted Ethel wrote a highly emotional letter to her “Dearest sweethearts, my most precious children”. It concluded: “Always remember that we were innocent and could not wrong our conscience. We press you close and kiss you with all our strength”.¹⁴⁴

Of course, Julius was *not* innocent, and Dwight Eisenhower and Irving Kaufman and J. Edgar Hoover all knew it. Those dozens of deputations conducted, hundreds of meetings held, tens of thousands of petition signatures collected, and millions of flyers, letters and brochures distributed throughout the previous twenty months were all doomed. Why? Because the FBI had access to the top-secret intercepts of Soviet intelligence messages obtained by the Venona code-breaking operation, and these confirmed Julius’s key role in an espionage ring. To prevent the Soviets realizing their codes had been compromised the intelligence was never used in court.¹⁴⁵ However, Hoover shared it with Kaufman: “Irving was in on everything”, said Roy Cohn, a prosecuting attorney at the Rosenberg trial. “He knew about the secret intercepts and that we couldn't use them”.¹⁴⁶ If so, it helps explain why “Kaufman told me *before* the trial started that he was going to sentence Julius Rosenberg to death”.¹⁴⁷ Eisenhower, too, was informed. And this helps explain why *he* was so intransigent.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Copy in Sobell Records, Box 48, Folder 5. At the same time she wrote her final, impassioned letter to Manny Bloch stating that she and Julius “will be vindicated by history”. Copy in TAM.132, Box 148, Folder 3.

¹⁴⁵ It is an historical irony that the Soviets learnt of the Venona crypto-analytic breakthrough in 1949 (thanks to the head of British intelligence in Washington, Kim Philby) and changed their codes.

¹⁴⁶ Cited in Alan M. Dershowitz, “Rosenbergs Were Guilty – and Framed”, *Los Angeles Times*, 19 July 1995.

¹⁴⁷ Sidney Zion, *The Autobiography of Roy Cohn* (Lyle Stuart: Secaucus, NJ., 1998), 77. Emphasis in original. See also Roy Cohn, “The Rosenberg Trial: The Judge, The Cardinal, and the Pope”, *New York*, 22 February 1988, 44. The director of the National Committee to Reopen the Rosenberg Case, Aaron Katz, was therefore not mistaken when he wrote to President Clinton that “The judge’s sentences were based not on the indictment or the trial record, but solely on the months of pre-trial charges by J. Edgar Hoover, the prosecution and the media”. Katz to Clinton, 10 November 1997 (emphasis in original). In his reply, the Acting Assistant Attorney General did not dispute this assertion (“...there is no constitutional infirmity in a sentencing judge relying on out-of-court information in determining an appropriate sentence”). John C. Keeney to Katz, 31 December 1997. Reuben Papers, Box 11, Folder 20, Tamiment.

“Organic intellectuals”?

Quite separate from whether or not its efforts were futile, the Rosenberg Committee was an emblem of resistance. This, in part, is where its historical significance lies. It started from scratch, met in homes, had few resources and built itself from the bottom up. It defied initial hostility from the CPUSA, a continuing wall of silence from the press, and constant monitoring, surveillance and infiltration from the FBI. Often it could not hire halls or place advertisements. When permission was secured it was often later withdrawn. Its press releases were consistently ignored. Radio stations repeatedly refused requests to present programs on the case.¹⁴⁹ So its task was herculean: “We faced an ocean of hostility, indifference, apathy and fear... [O]ur forces were too few for too long”.¹⁵⁰ In the permafrost conditions of early McCarthyism (1951-53) the label “Communist Party front” was affixed, and the organization was stigmatized and ostracized. (The more frontal assaults by the Internal Revenue Service and House Committee on Un-American Activities would come later.¹⁵¹) But the Rosenberg Committee drew deeply on the steadfast commitment, indefatigable energy, and almost zealous belief in the injustice of Rosenbergs’ sentence and, more naively, in their innocence. It resisted and then challenged the dominant hegemony that held that a fair trial had been conducted, that both Rosenbergs were guilty as charged and that, as traitors, they deserved to die. None of these was true, so the Rosenberg Committee disputed these untruths. Eventually, it garnered adherents and secured donations, which helped develop the momentum that spawned similar semi-autonomous committees across numerous American cities and regional localities.

¹⁴⁸ To the deputation of clergymen on the eve of the executions, Eisenhower, who “considered himself as religious as anyone in the room”, informed them that “he had other factors to take into account” in refusing clemency. He did not spell out these “other factors” but, conceivably, they included – or even centered on – the Venona decrypts. Loomer, “A Mercy Call at the White House”. None of this, of course, justifies the death sentence, especially in light of the far more lenient sentence imposed on Klaus Fuchs for a far more serious case of espionage.

¹⁴⁹ Sobell records, Box 26, Folder 3.

¹⁵⁰ Emily Alman, “Lessons of the Rosenberg case”.

¹⁵¹ In October 1954 it was sued by the IRS for unpaid taxes and in August 1956 it was investigated by HUAC; see *New York Times*, 19 October 1954; *Washington Post*, 3, 5, 6, and 27 August 1956.

It seems plausible to argue that, in certain important respects, members of the Rosenberg Committees conformed to Antonio Gramsci's conception of "organic intellectuals".¹⁵² Like such "organic intellectuals", these committees emerged from but were still connected to the everyday life of the working classes; they were open and non-sectarian in outlook; non-elitist in organizational structure (and therefore contrary to Stalinist "democratic centralism"); and they raised the consciousness of new social groups and won over their consent to counter-hegemonic ideas.¹⁵³ Whilst such committees were not revolutionary forces for undermining existing social relations, as Gramsci envisaged, such organic intellectuals in the Rosenberg committees confronted and undermined the anti-communist consensus by reaching into local communities from which grass-roots support was mobilized. This can be gauged by the appendices to an audit statement of the Rosenberg Committee itemizing assets and liabilities, and income and expenses for the period from 1 November 1951 to 31 August 1953. It noted that "the Committee sent 10 organizers out into the field during its two year campaign. Trips ran from 3 days to 6 weeks reaching hundreds of communities and covering many thousands of miles". It also noted that its income, mainly from "contributions and collections" (\$205,659.34) enabled it to print and circulate six million leaflets and pamphlets and half a million petitions and postcards. Its legal fees and expenses exceeded salaries paid, which is indicative of the degree of volunteer labor and unheralded effort.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² See Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds.), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of the Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 15-16; 332-35.

¹⁵³ As David Alman put it in private correspondence, "within the public there remained a vibrant and potentially dynamic strain of resistance to [McCarthyism]. That public could be reached by progressive forces, but the reach had to be non-sectarian, it had to be democratic in content and form and delivery. It had to be non-discriminatory in the sense that it made no assumption about how religious or other affiliations would affect a response to appeals for support. It had to be respectful toward what most people felt about our history and institutions." The Communist Party, in 1952-53, was none of these things. Correspondence to author, 25 August 2012.

¹⁵⁴ Audit Report, N. Harbus & Co., 7 October 1953, in Sobell Records, Box 19, Folder 4. This financial report was made public; see *St Petersburg Times*, 17 October 1953, 13. It was referred to frequently by HUAC in its investigations of the Rosenberg Committee; *Washington Post*, 3 August 1955.

Neither “organic intellectuals” nor the Rosenberg Committee members were fly-by-nighters whose activities quickly dried up or whose commitment was ephemeral. Indeed, the committee continued its work: it organized a memorial meeting (“Remember the Rosenbergs”) in Chicago on 17 June and the funeral in Long Island on 21 June;¹⁵⁵ self-published the handsome 48-page *Never Losing Faith*, which it sold for a mere \$1; sponsored the publication of the first edition of *Death House Letters* (Jero Publishing) in August;¹⁵⁶ organized the “Rosenberg Dedication Rally” at Randall’s Island stadium in September; held a major retrospective national conference on 10-11 October in Chicago;¹⁵⁷ and established the National Committee to Reopen the Rosenberg Case (NCRRC) in December that continues to this day. Nor was Morton Sobell, languishing in Alcatraz, forgotten, as the voluminous files in his name at the Wisconsin Historical Society Archives attest. Parallel with the NCRRC was the formation of the Committee to Secure Justice for Morton Sobell in the Rosenberg Case, of which Joseph Brainin was again chairman. Helen Sobell became a tireless campaigner for her husband, but the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg still stalked her:

Sometimes they call me Ethel
And wrap me in her shroud.

I never wore white satin,
Never was wed in June
My lips never sang
In full rich tune.

“You have two sons?”
Sometimes they say,
And place me in her grave.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ The Rosenbergs were buried in the vast Jewish Wellwood cemetery at Pinelawn, LI.; the Rosenberg Committee paid the \$2500 funeral expenses, including the disinterment of the bodies in vaults at \$350 each; see Samuel Karcovsky (funeral director) to Joseph Brainin, 11 March 1954, Sobell Records, Box 5, Folder 2.

¹⁵⁶ The first print run was 10,000; the Rosenberg Committee paid “all administrative costs, including all overheads”; Sobell Records, Box 26, Folder 10.

¹⁵⁷ Emily Alman, “Lessons of the Rosenberg case”.

¹⁵⁸ Helen Sobell, extract from “In Memorium” [nd], published in *The Minority of One*, July 1964, 10, Sobell Records, Box 35, Folder 7.