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JOHN RADZILOWSKI

THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA SINCE 1919

The Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) was the most important communist party outside of Europe until the 1940s. Although it entered a period of steep decline in the 1950s and was eclipsed by other communist movements in the Western Hemisphere (notably in Cuba and Nicaragua, where communist movements took power), the CPUSA maintains a visible but minor presence in American political life. Yet, even during the period of its decline, it had some importance in American cultural and social life that contradicted its relatively small size.

The CPUSA, like most other communist parties of the time, was under the control of the Soviet Union through the Comintern up until 1943. It served as an agent of Soviet influence and worked in secret with the intelligence services of the Soviet Union. During the first two decades of the party's existence i.e. the CPUSA, it also served as a conduit for technical and financial assistance to smaller or emerging communist parties in Asia. This was possible due to the extensive commercial ties the United States maintained with Asia, to the successful communist penetration into Asian immigrant communities on the West Coast of the USA, and to the strength of communist influence among workers in the maritime shipping industry. The American connection was particularly important in both the Philippines, then ruled by the U.S., and Japan where the Japanese police were exceptionally active in stamping out manifestations of communism. The Japanese communists not only received badly needed financial support through the American party, but they also received assistance in publishing and propaganda.¹

¹ H. Klehr, J.E. Haynes, F.I. Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven, 1995), p. 42–70.

Two rival communist parties formed in the U.S. in 1919: the Communist Party of America and the Communist Labor Party. Together they had about 34,000 members, the majority of whom were immigrants, mainly Jews from the former Russian Empire, Finns, and Russians, though there were also some Hungarians, Poles, Ukrainians, and Italians.² At the time, only several thousand of the 34,000 members spoke English. Only later in the 1930s were the majority of American communists native-born, English speakers. In 1921, under the pressure of the Comintern, the two parties were forced to merge into the CPUSA. Despite the merger, rivalry continued to divide the party throughout the 1920s, with disputes always being settled by Moscow through appeals and intervention. In 1929, party leaders Jay Lovestone and Benjamin Gitlow were expelled on the orders of Josef Stalin for allegedly supporting Stalin's rival Nikolai Bukarin and for having "right-wing tendencies."³ Earl Browder became the next party leader. He held the position until 1945 when he too, fell afoul of Stalin. Browder became the most significant communist leader in America. A devotee of Stalinism, he sought to recreate his own cult of personality within the CPUSA similar to that of his idol.⁴

The onset of the Great Depression in the U.S. after 1929 initially did little for the party's fortunes. Under orders from Moscow, the CPUSA denounced President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal program as reactionary and fascistic. The CPUSA bitterly opposed other leftist groups including the Socialists and played a crucial role in the disruption of efforts to unite the left-wing.⁵ Beginning in 1934, in light of the rise of Nazi Germany, the Comintern again shifted its position calling for the establishment of a Popular Front of anti-fascist forces on the left and center-left. Popular Front alliances were designed not only to oppose fascism but were supposed to allow communist parties to infiltrate and gain control of more mainstream leftist organizations. The CPUSA responded by dropping its opposition to the New Deal, by forming alliances with American Socialists and other leftist groups, and by supporting the growing movement for industrial unions, particularly the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). During the 1930s communists played a prominent role in CIO leadership in the lower and middle ranks despite never being a significant force among rank-and-file union members. During this period the CPUSA experienced its greatest influence. The party

² Among Poles who supported the CPUSA, the most prominent was Bolesław Gebert (1895–1986). Gebert wrote articles for CPUSA publications and acted as an agent for Soviet military intelligence (GRU) in the 1940s. More generally on the relationship of the security apparatus of the PRL with Polish American communists (and their actions against anti-communist forces in Polonia), see S. Cenkiewicz, *Oczami bezpieki: Szkice i materiały z dziejów aparatu bezpieczeństwa PRL* (Kraków, 2004); and S. Blejwas, "Polska Ludowa i Polonia amerykańska (1944–1956)", *Przegląd Polonijny*, vol. 21, no. 2 (1995), p. 9–41.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 4–8.

⁴ Ironically, Browder's grandson, William Browder, is an investment banker and a leading critic of Russian leader Vladimir Putin. William Browder was instrumental in passing the "Magnitsky Act" in the U.S., which froze assets of top Russian oligarchs involved in corruption. See J. Nordlinger, "A Family in History", *National Review*, Jan. 22, 2018, accessed online at <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/01/family-history-strange-odyssey-browders/>.

⁵ For example, communists violently disrupted a mass meeting in New York in 1934 called to protest the suppression of Socialists in Austria. See H. Klehr, J.E. Haynes, K.M. Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven, 1998), p. 282–285.

also attracted widespread support in Hollywood and among many intellectuals and artists. Party membership was near to 100,000.⁶

In 1939, the Nazi-Soviet Pact led to a sharp shift in policy. The CPUSA along with all its Popular Front allies abruptly abandoned its opposition to Nazism. Instead, it demanded a “peace” platform, opposed American assistance for countries fighting Germany, and sabotaged the anti-Nazi programs of other left-wing groups which included disrupting of public rallies against fascism. The CPUSA sought to undermine all American opposition to Nazi Germany as the German army conquered much of East-Central, Western, and Northern Europe initiating a reign of terror. This position changed abruptly yet again in June 1941 with the German attack on the Soviet Union. The CPUSA then gave its full support to the fight against Germany. It once again experienced a period of renewed influence during the war, but largely failed to regain the trust of most other left-wing groups.

During the 1930s the CPUSA and its Soviet handlers in America came under increasing surveillance by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) which began to monitor party activity and ties to Soviet operatives. Although government investigators acquired some important leads during this period and imprisoned Browder in 1941 for using a false passport, the party’s illegal activities and its participation in Soviet espionage continued unabated. Only in 1945 with the defection of Soviet agents Whittaker Chambers and Elizabeth Bentley, did the FBI begin to make significant progress against communist espionage, though too late to prevent significant damage to American interests, especially in the area of nuclear espionage. During the late 1940s and 1950s the CPUSA came under increasing pressure from law enforcement. At the same time its slavish support for the Soviet Union and Stalin made it increasingly unattractive to most Americans. Although in the 1960s and 1970s anti-communism itself fell into disrepute and support for left-wing politics grew once again, the CPUSA was not able to take advantage of this change. The so-called New Left had little interest in supporting the Soviet Union which was seen as a force for stagnation on the left, preferring instead to model their approaches on those of Third World communists such as Mao Tse-Tung, Ho Chi Minh, and Fidel Castro.

OUTLINE OF AMERICAN RESEARCH ON THE CPUSA

American scholarship on the CPUSA has always been sharply divided into two camps. This major division between these two camps centers on the question of how autonomous the CPUSA was vis-à-vis Moscow. The standard view, which continues to be strongly held throughout much of American academia, is that this American party was a home-grown political movement. While it respected the Soviet Union and at times took a common political stance on important issues, it was largely independent. Scholars from this camp emphasize the CPUSA as being left-wing but still a fully American “progressive”

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 9–12.

organization, pointing to its positions on racial equality and its role in the American labor movement.⁷ This view is still the one most likely to be found in American school textbooks and in popular media - most notably Hollywood films, which have portrayed communists and communism in very favorable terms since the 1940s.⁸

A second school of work viewed communism as a movement foreign to the U.S. and, indeed, anti-American at its core. The CPUSA, in this respect, was an arm of the Soviet Union and sought to undermine the United States. Despite its position on race relations and the rights of labor, it was driven by a violent, totalitarian ideology and its stance on "social justice" issues was largely a facade designed to cover its true nature. During the height of the Cold War in the 1950s, this anti-communism became closely associated with the work of Sen. Joseph McCarthy, who held a series of public hearings on communist infiltration of the U.S. government and society. McCarthy frequently overstated his case, used unethical tactics and often made false accusations. The reaction against McCarthy by a broad range of Americans ended up seriously discrediting anti-communism in the United States. As one work put it, "In his often inaccurate charges, 'supported' by exaggerated, distorted, misleading, and sometimes entirely false evidence, he equated Communists with Soviet spies, fellow travelers with Communists, and liberal anti-Communists with fellow travelers. By persuading many liberals that anticommunism was synonymous with demagoguery and in opposition to the New Deal, McCarthy turned anticommunism into a partisan political issue."⁹ This benign image of the CPUSA has been bolstered by a large number of biographies, memoirs and other personal accounts written by party insiders or by sympathetic authors.

Despite the political failures of anti-communism in the USA, a small group of scholars produced far more critical studies of the CPUSA and American communism, emphasizing its totalitarian ideology and links to the Soviet Union. Many of the early critics of the party were themselves former leftists and even former party members who found themselves cast out of the movement or became disillusioned with communism. The best known of these was Theodore Draper whose early studies of American communism set the standard for scholarship.¹⁰ In addition, a few memoirs by former agents of Soviet intelligence in the U.S. were published. The most significant of these was *Witness* by Whittaker Chambers, a former agent of Soviet military intelligence, which showed that American communists working for the Soviets had infiltrated important branches

⁷ See R.D.G. Kelly, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, 1990); M. Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936* (Oxford, Miss., 1998); F. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States from the Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1991); G.S. Taylor, *The History of the North Carolina Communist Party* (Columbia, 2009).

⁸ These include *Mission to Moscow* (1943); *The North Star* (1943); *Song of Russia* (1944); *Che* (1969); *Reds* (1981); *Guilty by Suspicion* (1991); *Frida* (2002); *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004); *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005); *Che: A Revolutionary Life* (2008); and *Trumbo* (2015).

⁹ H. Klehr, J.E. Haynes, K.M. Anderson, *The Soviet World...*, p. 6.

¹⁰ T. Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York, 1957); *idem, American Communism and Soviet Russia: The Formative Period* (New York, 1960).

of the U.S. government.¹¹ Nevertheless, from the 1960s to the early 1990s studies critical of the CPUSA remained in the minority, though many on the American left had long ceased to feel deep sympathy for the Soviet Union, preferring instead Maoist China, Castro's Cuba, or other communist movements in developing countries.

The most significant breakthrough in studies of the CPUSA occurred in 1993 when Russian officials agreed to allow scholars from the U.S. Library of Congress to microfilm the complete records of the party, held in a secret closed archive in Moscow. The records contained material dated between 1919 and 1944.¹² This collection demonstrated conclusively that the CPUSA had been entirely under the control of Moscow, regularly receiving directives and large sums of money from the Soviet Union and that it had been performing orders of the Soviets which included engaging in widespread espionage through a secret branch of the party. The close ties between the party and the Soviet Union continued even as the party membership aged and dwindled in size, allowing some party leaders to lead lives of relative ease and even luxury.

The trove of documents led to a series of books on the CPUSA and covert Soviet actions in the U.S. by historians John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr. Their books not only confirm many of the critical aspects of CPUSA history but also reproduce numerous key documents. These publications were supplemented by several other works based on other Soviet documents found by various Russian dissidents or former KGB officials as well as by the declassification and release of U.S. government surveillance documents, notably the Venona Project.¹³ Despite the overwhelming evidence of the deep ties between the CPUSA and the Soviets, most historians of the American left continued to view the party in a favorable manner, dismissing all evidence to the contrary, and subjecting based on the released documents, to severe public attack,¹⁴ including personal attacks on Haynes and Klehr. Although the new work on the party gained wide readership, the increasing leftward drift of American academia in the 2000s has ensured that the old paradigm of the CPUSA as a friend of the America's downtrodden and a victim of unjust anti-communist persecution, has remained intact. Indeed throughout 2017, the *New York Times* published a long series of articles, written by prominent scholars and journalists, extolling the virtues of communism to commemorate the centennial of the Russian Revolution.¹⁵

¹¹ W. Chambers, *Witness* (New York, 1952).

¹² See "Library of Congress Opens to Researchers the Records of the Communist Party, USA" press release, Jan. 18, 2001, accessed online, March 11, 2018, <https://www.loc.gov/item/prn-01-007/library-of-congress-opens-to-researchers-the-records/2001-01-18/>. The party itself donated a second large group of records from the period 1950 to 1980, albeit without the secret material it surely once contained to New York University Library in 2007. See http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/tamwag/tam_132/.

¹³ See <https://www.nsa.gov/news-features/declassified-documents/venona/>.

¹⁴ See for example <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=91>; "Klehr on Taylor, 'The History of the North Carolina Communist Party'" accessed online at <https://networks.h-net.org/node/8909/reviews/14165/klehr-taylor-history-north-carolina-communist-party>.

¹⁵ See, in response, S. Amhari, "Making the World Safe for Communism – Again", *Commentary*, Oct. 18, 2017, accessed online at: <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/politics-ideas/making-the-world-safe-for-communism-again/>

SOVIET CONTROL OVER THE CPUSA

One of the most significant questions concerning the CPUSA is its relationship with the Soviet Union and the Soviet state's leadership, especially during the crucial period of Stalinism. As noted previously, Soviet authorities in Comintern intervened frequently in the internal workings of the party. This included vetting individuals for middle and upper leadership positions, setting policy, determining content of CPUSA publications, and even setting dates of meetings.¹⁶ Moreover, the Soviet Union provided massive funding for the CPUSA from the beginning of its establishment. The initial funding, that was provided after the Bolshevik Revolution, appears to have included jewelry and other valuables stolen from enemies of the Communist party and smuggled to the West for sale on the black market. Even during the height of party membership in the 1930s when the CPUSA was able to collect significant amounts in dues from members, between a third and a half of the party's funds¹⁷ came from secret subsidies from the Comintern. This significant amount of funding provided by the Soviet Union was no doubt an important factor that allowed the CPUSA to publish newspapers in over twenty languages in the U.S., including long-running publications in languages with very small numbers of American readers. e.g., Estonian, Lithuanian.

Scholars supportive of the CPUSA – those who do not try to deny completely the documentary evidence of Soviet control – point to the role of local communist groups whose membership received far less scrutiny from Moscow as evidence that the majority of party members were not taking directions from Moscow. Despite these claims, pro-communist historians have presented little hard evidence of autonomy on the part of average party members¹⁸. There is little doubt that most people who joined the CPUSA did so out of attraction to the public ideological goals of communism rather than a desire to be subservient to the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the internal culture of the party, its publications, and its policy continually emphasised the leading role of the Soviet Union as the homeland and originator of the Revolution. Many CPUSA members went to the Soviet Union to receive training and education. All things considered, there is no evidence that most members of the CPUSA would have questioned or disputed the idea that the party should conform itself to Moscow's directions.

The CPUSA spent a significant amount of time and effort monitoring and persecuting rivals at Moscow's behest. Even though only a few American communists followed the direction of Jay Lovestone, and that Leon Trotsky had few American supporters, the CPUSA generated a tremendous amount of documentation on its struggle against "Lovestoneism" and "Trotskyites." Those suspected of such leanings were spied on, monitored, and denounced regularly with the results transmitted back to Moscow. More significantly, the party also gave assistance to Soviet opera-

¹⁶ H. Klehr, J.E. Haynes, K.M. Anderson, *The Soviet World...*, p. 21–48.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 107–164; H. Klehr, J.E. Haynes, F.I. Firsov, *The Secret World...*, p. 20–40.

¹⁸ J.E. Haynes, H. Klehr, *In Denial: Historians, Communism, and Espionage* (San Francisco, 2003), p. 134–139.

tives conducting active measures against Stalin's enemies, including aiding the agent that assassinated Trotsky.¹⁹

A particularly shameful example of American communism's relationship to Stalinism was the role the party played in covering up and justifying the persecution of fellow Americans caught up in Stalin's purges. Following the Revolution, a significant number of American and Canadian Communists emigrated to the Soviet Union to join "the workers' paradise." The majority were Finnish immigrants, but their ranks included some African Americans and Anglo Americans. During Stalin's purges, many of these North American communists, along with other foreigners, were falsely accused of being agents of foreign imperialists or being involved in elaborate schemes to destroy the Soviet Union, to kill Stalin, or to wreck industries. Dozens of Americans who had given up their passports were executed or died in the gulags. Those who managed to escape the terror and return to the U.S. were silenced by the party through intimidation and social pressure. Party members who spoke too freely of what they had seen and experienced in the Soviet Union were expelled from the party and subjected to a regime of harassment by the CPUSA. Those killed were denounced as traitors and enemies of the working class. As with the Lovestoneists and Trotskyites, CPUSA leaders reported on their campaign against the returnees with evident pride.²⁰

AMERICAN REACTIONS TO THE NAZI-SOVIET PACT

One of the best illustrations of the subservience of the CPUSA to Stalin was its reaction to the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939. The party's membership remained stable in 1939, when the CPUSA, in conformity with Stalin's dictates, broke ties with the Popular Front initiative, ended its backing for Roosevelt's policies and opposed any active support for the fight against Nazism. The Nazi-Soviet pact, which was immensely unpopular among all other elements of the American left, and doomed efforts to create a common front in support of increased American assistance to the victims of Hitler, resulted in no mass defections from the CPUSA among its rank-and-file members. In other words, loyalty to the party and strict conformity to the new Soviet policy overrode whatever misgivings individual party members might have held regarding the pact with Germany. As Klehr and Haynes note "anti-fascism, sometimes said to be a defining characteristic of rank-and-file Communists, was less important than loyalty to the Soviet Union."²¹

American Communists opposed Polish resistance to the German invasion in 1939 and defended the Soviet attack on Finland in 1940. When party leaders in the U.S. deviated even slightly from the wishes of their Soviet masters, they were corrected in a swift

¹⁹ H. Klehr, J.E. Haynes, F.I. Firsov, *The Secret World...*, p. 128–32, 142–43; H. Klehr, J.E. Haynes, K.M. Anderson, *The Soviet World...*, p. 272–311.

²⁰ For a partial list of those executed, see J.E. Haynes, H. Klehr, *In Denial...*, p. 235–247.

²¹ H. Klehr, J.E. Haynes, K.M. Anderson, *The Soviet World...*, p. 72–73.

and clear manner. In September 1939, a directive from Moscow laid out the correct party line in a message to party leader Browder: "The current war is imperialist, unjust, and equally reactionary for all warring capitalist powers. This is not a war of democracy against fascism but a war between reactionary imperialist Germany and the reactionary, imperialist states of England, France, and Poland." The directive noted specifically on the subject of Poland that, "Poland was a reactionary multinational state built on the oppression of Ukrainians, Belorussians, and Jews. It decayed because of the corruption of its ruling classes. The international proletariat has no interest in the existence of such a parasitical state... The Soviet Union, in coming to the aid of western Ukrainian and Belorussian workers, saved 11 million people from a capitalist hell."²²

CPUSA AND THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT

Another area of close Soviet supervision was the relationship between the CPUSA and the American labor movement. While a full history of American unions is complex and outside the scope of this article, at the start of the twentieth century, the most important American Union was the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which mostly represented craft-based unions in skilled trades. Its membership was dominated by native-born, English speaking Americans. The AFL was reluctant to organize large, heavy industries with their large body of unskilled and semi-skilled workers who were primarily immigrants from southern and east-central Europe. Radical leftists despised the AFL which took relatively moderate stands on social and political issues. By the time of World War I, the more radical unionists had formed the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, also known as "Wobblies"), which was often involved in violent confrontations with industry and was subject to frequent efforts of suppression by state and local law enforcement.

Although American communists were ideologically aligned with the IWW, beginning in 1920, the Comintern ordered the party to work with the AFL. In response, CPUSA activist and future party leader William Z. Foster, formed the Trade Union Education League (TUEL) which was designed to radicalize existing AFL unions. According to Klehr and Haynes, TUEL received significant funding and support from the Comintern and began to make inroads into several American unions. In 1928, however, the Soviets again changed course and demanded a more confrontational approach designed to bring on the final crisis of world capitalism. TUEL was transformed into the more radical Trade Union Unity League (TUUL) and American communists repudiated their allies in mainstream unions and treated the AFL as their bitter enemy. While the onset of the Depression resulted in growing support for American unions, the Communists having abandoned most of the unions, were left on the sidelines. Thus in 1934, the Comintern once again ordered a reversal of policy and demanded that TUUL be reduced in size and scope, and communists now try to work with the AFL and related

²² *Ibidem*, p. 81–83.

unions in another attempt to covertly control them. While the CPUSA again sought to ingratiate itself with the AFL and infiltrate its leadership, many industrial workers (who the party had desperately wanted to recruit) left the AFL to form the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). So yet again in 1937 the CPUSA was ordered to abandon the AFL and to join the CIO. During the late 1930s, CPUSA finally managed to achieve some measure of influence in American unions when they secured leadership positions in many sectors of the new CIO. Nevertheless the vast majority of rank-and-file members did not join the party or support its goals. After 1948, most known communists were removed from positions of leadership in the CIO and from related industrial unions.²³ The constant changes in Soviet policy had a very negative effect on the communists' ability to capitalize on the rapid growth of American unions during the 1930s and early 1940s. In addition, the CPUSA frequently undermined the position of other left-wing groups within the union movement. Given that many American workers were suspicious of leftist groups to begin with, the CPUSA's incontinence contributed to an American labor movement which was far more mainstream and far less radical than would have otherwise been the case. Needless to say this has not stopped many labor historians from continuing to celebrate the role of communists in the union movement to the exclusion of many other factors.²⁴

COMMUNIST ESPIONAGE IN THE USA

The most significant aspect of CPUSA history has been its espionage activities on behalf of the Soviet Union. Public evidence of this party's involvement in espionage has existed since the defection of a number of American communists in the 1940s and 1950s who worked as Soviet agents. The CPUSA and authors sympathetic to it denied and downplayed such evidence often describing the defectors as liars or as suffering from mental illnesses. The case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed in 1953 for passing nuclear secrets to the Soviets, was a cause célèbre for the American left for decades.

The opening of CPUSA files from the former Soviet Union and the declassification of a number of previously secret U.S. government papers has demonstrated the deep involvement of the party in carrying out espionage on behalf of the Soviets. On the American side, the declassification of the Venona project was especially significant. Venona was a U.S. counterintelligence program that decrypted Soviet cables from the consulate in New York relating to activities of Soviet military intelligence in the Western hemisphere.²⁵ These collections have been supplemented by the work of Russian

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 48–55.

²⁴ See for example, John Radzilowski, review of *Down on the Killing Floor: Black & White Workers in Chicago's Packing Houses*, by Rick Halpern, *Polish American Studies*, vol. 59, no. 2 (Autumn 2002), p. 112–115.

²⁵ See H. Romerstein E. Breindel, *The Venona Secrets: The Definitive Expose of Soviet Espionage in America* (Chicago, 2000); J.E. Haynes, H. Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven, 1999).

researcher Alexander Vassiliev, a former archivist who compiled extensive notes of closed archives related to Soviet intelligence operations in the U.S.²⁶

The most sensational part of the Soviet spying effort was related to the effort to penetrate American atomic bomb research – the Manhattan Project – which the Soviets appropriately codenamed “Enormous.” Several former (i.e., clandestine) party members were able to obtain positions within institution working on the project and provided significant technical data for the Soviets that allowed Stalin to acquire atomic weapons by 1949, several years earlier than would have been the case otherwise. American communists also provided information on a wide variety of scientific and industrial matters of interest to the Soviets. They also penetrated the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the predecessor to the CIA. They spied on members of Congress and provided access to documents from a variety of non-military, government departments. While not all the spies used by the Soviets were affiliated with the CPUSA, the great majority were. Moreover the CPUSA provided support and assistance to Soviet agents, acted as couriers and ran safe houses that materially aided Soviet espionage.

CONCLUSION

Despite significant work that has revealed the deep Soviet control over the CPUSA, the party’s involvement with Moscow is largely ignored by most American historians and receives little mention in most textbooks at the high school or college level. Whereas during the Cold War, writers on the left put considerable effort in attacking the work of anti-communist authors, especially on issues such as the guilt of the Rosenbergs, today these matters are more often ignored, described as “old news,” or otherwise sidestepped.

Although most academic historians in the U.S. have moved to the far left in their politics, aside from a few die-hard specialists, most remain ambivalent toward the CPUSA. The party’s history of slavish adherence to a Soviet-style Marxism doctrinaire was never of much interest to academics who came of age following the rise of the “New Left” in the 1960s and thereafter. This later generation of Marxist intellectuals found communist “liberation” movements in Asia, Latin America, and Africa of far greater interest. Mao Tse-tung, Che Guevarra, Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, and Franz Fanon proved far more compelling than Leonid Brezhnev. Moreover, the work of Herbert Marcuse and post-modern “critical theorists” have long since supplanted Marx, Engels, and Lenin on the reading lists of the academic left in the U.S. Currently, most new research that is considered “cutting edge” in American academia relates to questions of race, gender, or “Queer Theory.” Even fields formerly popular with the New Left, such as labor history, are now viewed mainly as a vehicle for work on race or gender. Thus, the general history of the CPUSA is increasingly eclipsed by work on the party’s approach to racial questions, “gender history,” or “gay liberation,” all of which have been the subject of

²⁶ J.E. Haynes, H. Klehr, A. Vassiliev, *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America* (New Haven, 2010).

more recent scholarly research.²⁷ Additionally, given the focus on “transgressive” racial or gender ideology, the histories of specific radical groups are viewed more generally, which has somewhat blurred the specific history of the CPUSA with the history of other left-wing groups.

Nevertheless, the view of the CPUSA in American academia remains broadly favorable. The CPUSA’s support for the Soviet Union is viewed as laudable less from some approval of the actions of the Soviets themselves and more because the party is viewed as opposing America and American interests which are more often than not viewed as synonymous with racism and oppression. While the work of authors such as Haynes and Klehr is still faithfully denounced in most left-leaning periodicals the more common reaction to them is indifference. Paradoxically, while in spite of greater volumes and more accurate work on the history of the CPUSA being available today more than ever before, scholarly interest in the specifics of the party’s history is also at its lowest.

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²⁷ See N. Markowitz, “The Communist Movement” and G. Rights, “The Hidden History”, *Political Affairs*, Aug. 6, 2013, accessed online at <http://politicalaffairs.net/the-communist-movement-and-gay-rights-the-hidden-history/>

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The Communist Party of the United States of America since 1919

The Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) was the most influential communist party in the Western Hemisphere until the 1950s. Although it never had a mass membership, it gained the allegiance of many influential political and cultural figures. Its membership consisted of Anglo-Saxons as well as immigrants and children of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. The CPUSA played a controversial role in American political history in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s when attempts by anti-communists to discredit the party as an arm of the Soviet Union backfired. Scholarship on the CPUSA is deeply divided as a result of these political controversies. Traditional scholarship emphasized the CPUSA as an indigenous development with limited ties to the Soviet Union. This school lauded the CPUSA for its apparent support of civil rights, unions, and racial equality. A revisionist approach emphasized the party's ties to Moscow and viewed it as dedicated to supporting a foreign totalitarian regime. Since 1991, the release of many secret CPUSA documents has strongly supported the revisionist school, demonstrating that the party followed closely the political and operational directives of Soviet security services and was deeply involved in assisting Soviet espionage and acted as an agent of influence for the USSR.

KEYWORDS

Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), Earl Browder, anti-communism, Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, Manhattan Project, espionage

JOHN RADZILOWSKI – PhD, is Associate Professor of History at University of Alaska Southeast. He is the author of numerous books and articles on U.S. and Polish history with a special interest on the history of American Polonia. His recent books include *Traveler's History of Poland* (Moreton-in-Marsh 2007), *Frantic 7: The American Effort to Aid the Warsaw Uprising and the Origins of the Cold War, 1944* (co-author with J. Szcześniak, Havertown, PA–Oxford 2017).