

Little “Red Scares”: Anti-Communism and Political Repression in the United States, 1921-1946

Review Number:

1730

Publish date:

Thursday, 19 February, 2015

Editor:

Robert Justin Goldstein

ISBN:

9781409410911

Date of Publication:

2014

Price:

£70.00

Pages:

371pp.

Publisher:

Ashgate

Publisher url:

<http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9781409410911>

Place of Publication:

Farnham

Reviewer:

Jennifer Luff

As it recedes in historical memory, American anti-communism becomes more interesting as a historical phenomenon. Try explaining a slogan like ‘Better dead than red’ to a roomful of undergraduates born long after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In retrospect, American anti-communism stands out for its coherence, vehemence, and endurance. An anti-communist membrane structured and stabilized postwar American politics, and its rapid disintegration after 1989 set off a disorderly realignment of alliances and ideologies that continues to shift. Anti-communism was not simply an American invention, of course, but the American version was distinguished by the relative weakness of communist and socialist parties and trade unions in the United States. While European, Asian, and African anti-communists confronted formidable opponents, Americans largely learned to despise communism as a foreign force and a domestic apparition. The language of anti-communism survives as an ersatz discourse still deployed to attack the remnants of America’s meagre welfare state (as when opponents recently denounced President Obama’s health-insurance initiatives as ‘communistic’). But anti-communism and its McCarthyist manifestations are more often remembered with opprobrium in both popular culture and history textbooks. For baffled students, this disrepute makes it hard to inhabit the mindset of anti-communism. It makes more sense as a ‘hysteria’, as it is often termed, than a set of ideas.

This very strangeness makes anti-communism a prime field for new historical research. How did anti-communism develop into such a potent force in American politics? The Cold War is only part of the story,

because it started long before Sputnik. The Bolshevik revolution kindled a popular politics of antipathy toward the Soviet Union and hostility toward communism that smoldered for decades before the Cold War. It first exploded in the 'Red Scare' surge of arrests and deportations in 1919-1920. From the late 1930s, anti-communism grew into a protean ideology that underwrote unlikely political coalitions and justified contradictory policies. In recent years, historians in diverse fields have begun to explore how anti-communism operated in sometimes surprising ways. Scholars of 'Cold War civil rights' have shown how competition with the Soviet Union gave civil rights activists a potent argument for desegregation. Historians of the rise of conservatism have revealed how anti-communism offered a common language to California housewives and City College intellectuals. Histories of second-wave feminism have described the ways that anti-communism drove someone like Bettye Goldstein, a trade-union feminist with close communist ties in the 1930s, to reinvent herself as Betty Friedan, liberal suburban housewife, in the 1960s. Most of this scholarship focuses on the years after World War II, when anti-communism had fully matured into a mainstream politics. We need more research on the early years of American anti-communism, when its core tenets developed before the long shadow of the Cold War.

Little 'Red Scares': Anti-Communism and Political Repression in the United States, 1921-1946, Robert Justin Goldstein's new edited collection on inter-war anti-communism, is thus a welcome addition. Goldstein, an emeritus professor of political science at Oakland University in Michigan, has written widely on the history of American political repression, and he has assembled a wide-ranging selection of essays that reflects longstanding trends in scholarship on early American anti-communism. Four essayists are retired scholars, and several authors' contributions draw on already published work; readers will find this collection generally recapitulates existing literature rather than breaks new ground. The inter-war years, says Goldstein, show that 'the red scare never really ended' after 1920, but rather continued as a series of 'little red scares' which peaked from 1938 to 1941, just before United States entry to the Second World War (pp. xiv-xv). Numerous scholars, Ellen Schrecker most prominently, have made similar arguments, seeing McCarthyism as the peak on a continuous trajectory of increasing antiradical repression and antipathy that began long before 1917. *Little 'Red Scares'* maintains a very tight focus on domestic politics within the United States and on anti-communists themselves; the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) is mentioned in passing as a target of anti-communists, but the Party and its activists rarely feature as agents in their own right. Many of the essays are concerned to show how anti-communist repression operated as a guise for other motives such as squelching labor radicalism, blocking African-American liberation, or derailing the New Deal. This strain of scholarship has a long heritage, stretching back to contemporary analyses by people such as historian Richard Hofstadter, whose 1955 essay 'The pseudo-conservative revolt' famously cast popular anti-communism as a politics of status anxiety driven by the downwardly-mobile. In recent years historians have expanded our understanding of anti-communism as a politics of pretext, documenting how loyalty investigations enabled a 'lavender scare' that expelled gays and lesbians from federal jobs, terrorized scientists in an atomic 'age of anxiety,' and convinced Hollywood to mute radical themes in film.

A central player in such narratives is the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), headed by J. Edgar Hoover from 1924 through 1972. Ernest Freeberg, who has written on Eugene Debs and the movement for war-prisoner amnesty, shows in his essay how widespread revulsion for the first Red Scare crackdowns produced a new civil liberties movement and popular demands for limiting the power of the FBI, which was debarred from political policing after 1924. In his contribution, Athan Theoharis, longtime historian of the FBI, summarizes the main themes that have threaded through his research: under Hoover's virulently anti-communist leadership, the FBI continually overstepped its legal authority to investigate and harass communists and sought to expand the power of the Bureau, regardless of the actual nature of communist activity. Theoharis and other authors mention the secret authorization Hoover sought and received from President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936 to track communists, especially in the trade unions, although no federal law authorized such investigations, and emphasize the reports sent to Hoover by local police departments and freelance antiradicals to suggest that a power-hungry FBI continually overrode democratic control. It should be noted that recent scholarship has shown that the FBI's internal politics and institutional footing were considerably more complex in this period. As Raymond Batvinis demonstrates, lacking statutory authority, the FBI could take little action against the Communist Party, and in any event regarded

German and Japanese subversion as a far greater threat in the late 1930s.⁽¹⁾ To the extent that the 1930s was America's 'Red Decade', the FBI's relative restraint was a key reason.

Of course, America's historically fractured state authority meant that policing powers resided more with states and localities, and detective agencies and veterans' groups were frequently deputized for anti-radical efforts. Historian M. J. Heale argues that in the inter-war years, non-state actors such as the American Legion and employers' organizations provided the driving force of anti-communism, and they tended toward rather loose definitions of 'Communist', painting strikers and civil rights organizers with a red brush. Heale treats inter-war anti-communism as a manifestation of 'the American tradition of an engaged citizenry' (p. 45), vigilant and primed to organize voluntaristic forms of policing. Labor historian Chad Pearson describes how employers worked with vigilant groups to proselytize against communism among their workers, and invoke the red menace when faced with labor unrest. In his essay, Eric Smith shows the American Legion, in league with the Catholic charity Knights of Columbus, at work investigating American volunteers for the Spanish Civil War. Voluntaristic anti-communist mobilizations also appear in Timothy Cain's account of attacks by freelance antiradicals such as Elizabeth Dilling on public schoolteachers. These 'armchair anti-communists', as I call them, conjured vast red conspiracies to infiltrate American institutions, and searched through newspaper clippings and Congressional hearings to chart communist webs of influence. Cain sees this brand of anti-communism as continuous with broader trends of antiradicalism, and teachers were as likely to be accused of pacifism as of Soviet sympathies.

One feature that distinguished interwar American anti-communism from its Cold War variant was its focus on unions and working-class organizations. While federal civil servants and social elites came under scrutiny in the 1940s and 1950s, the laboring classes seemed like the natural home for radical politics after the Bolshevik Revolution. Yet trade unionists divided on the virtues of Communism, and many union leaders, particularly within the American Federation of Labor, became sworn and active anti-communists in the inter-war years. Markku Ruotsila details how union leaders often collaborated with anti-communist crackdowns, arguing that labor 'ended up as the accomplices as much as the victims of the anti-communist campaigns of others' (p. 166). By contrast, working-class African Americans who organized tenant farmers' unions and legal defense funds with Communist support did not display such ideological splits. The CPUSA's embrace of black liberation in the early 1930s won loyalties from African Americans that were not severely tested until the late 1930s. In her contribution, Robbie Lieberman traces the role of Communists and other radicals in the 'long civil rights movement', and she casts its repression in broad terms as part of an 'attack on civil liberties in the name of Americanism aimed at undermining movements for justice and equality' (pp. 262–3). The refusal of African-American activists to denounce Communism in the 1930s, as trade unions had, gave fodder to redbaiting attacks on the post-war civil rights movement, while non-Communist unions largely were politically insulated from such redbaiting in the 1940s and 1950s.

The institutional patterns and structures for Cold War loyalty oaths and Congressional investigations had already been created by the late 1930s, and several authors show how these apparatuses came into being. The Dies Committee, created in 1938 to investigate communism and fascism, followed a long tradition of Congressional investigative committees harrying the executive branch. Kenneth O'Reilly details its rapid transformation into chief heckler of Roosevelt's administration, with charges of communist infiltration its main taunt. O'Reilly overstates the collaboration between Dies and the FBI; Hoover resented Dies's incursion onto FBI territory and implications of FBI incompetence, and in the late 1930s, Hoover's FBI often rebutted Dies's wildest claims. (The Dies Committee morphed into the permanent House Un-American Activities Committee after the war, and the FBI's relation to it changed considerably then.) Rebecca Hill describes the enactment of the Hatch Act in 1939, which banned communists and fascists from the federal civil service, and the Smith Act in 1940, which criminalized membership in communist and fascist organizations. Although the discourse of the late 1930s continually linked communism and fascism, as antiradicals aimed to demonize communism and liberals sought to fight fascism, Hill argues that communists endured far more scrutiny and repression.

Once these laws were in place, Landon Storrs argues, Congressional conservatives deployed them to attack consumer advocates, the foot soldiers of the New Deal. The Dies Committee used its Capitol Hill platform

to harass leftist women from the enormously popular and decidedly non-communist consumer movement who had entered New Deal agencies. Despite the stalwart defense of leading New Dealers, including FDR and Eleanor Roosevelt, the continual strain of insinuation and investigation drove many of these leftists from Washington, and helped purge the New Deal of its social-democratic vision. Storrs's work is among the best in this vein, revealing how anti-communism operated as a cover for various iniquitous agendas. For a long line of scholars stretching back to the 1950s, anti-communism was a politics of bad faith.

But why did it work? After all, the ulterior motives of these anti-communist crusaders were quite visible, and often remarked, by observers who could plainly discern that anti-unionism underlay employers' anti-communist claims, or that Martin Dies hated FDR. Canards are common enough in politics, and often discredited. In his essay on the Fish Committee, convened in 1930 to investigate Communism, Alex Goodall describes a moment when an anti-communist initiative failed. Hamilton Fish was a jingoistic politician who sought to use his investigative committee to build up his patriotic bona fides and burnish his reputation. But, as Goodall shows, the parade of witnesses frequently derided the idea that communism was a real menace to the body politic; J. Edgar Hoover himself downplayed the threat and insisted that Congress should pass a new anti-sedition law if the FBI was to police communists. Despite months of effort to whip up his own little red scare, Fish's committee succeeded in cementing a conviction that communism required no federal action at all. If the red scare never really ended, as Goldstein suggests, what accounts for this apparent break?

On closer inspection, the red scare doesn't look so continuous after all, and the essays in this volume underline its discontinuities. Many of the essays tend to telescope events and geographies, and create an impression of sustained anti-communist repression. But much of the evidence and many of the events described occur in the late 1930s and early 1940s – that is, after the Soviet Union had negotiated a separate peace with Germany in the Non-Aggression Pact, while the United States debated entering the war. Many of these measures should properly be seen as wartime actions (and were rolled back after the Soviets joined the Allies in 1941). An emergent and robust civil libertarianism contained roiling eddies of popular anti-communism at various moments in the 1920s and 1930s, when the memories of the first Red Scare abuses remained strong.

In this light, it's worth looking again at the moment in 1936 when Hoover requested secret authorization from FDR to surveil communists and fascists. Why did that request have to remain secret? If anti-communist sentiment and repression were so widespread, surely FDR could simply have announced a change in policy, or sought legislative authority from Congress. But he did neither, because Congress had repeatedly refused to grant federal authority for political policing in the 1920s and 1930s. It took the shock of the Non-Aggression Pact to create the political impetus for curtailing the civil liberties of communists and fascists. It's also worth noting that the Smith Act and Hatch Act were quite narrow, specifying communism and fascism as proscribed political views; these were not general anti-radical laws that criminalized trade union activity, or civil rights organizing. The hard work of deploying these laws against civil rights activists, gay federal workers, and others took time and effort. In retrospect, what stands out in the inter-war years is not the consistency of repression, but the popular support for broad civil liberties.

This is not to discount the significance of inter-war anti-communism. On the contrary, seeing early anti-communism as a highly contingent and historically situated occurrence rather than an instance of a general anti-radical, chauvinistic tendency in American politics highlights how strange and specific it was. Many Americans in the inter-war years came to oppose communism personally and ideologically, some through direct experience with communist co-workers, neighbors, and organizers, and others through reading or hearing about it. Some anti-communists dedicated themselves to spreading the word and winning others to the cause, and their voices can be heard in the testimony of the various investigating committees of the era. The development of these ideas in the absence of a significant Communist presence, when the United States was not at war with the Soviet Union (and, from 1933, diplomatically recognized and traded with it), was curious. By treating it as an obvious or already-explicable phenomenon, we downplay what was exceptional about American anti-communism, and misread Cold War politics, as Hofstadter and others did, as an episode of delusion or hysteria. In fact, the contingencies of the Second World War and its aftermath created a global political dynamic that suddenly elevated a protean popular American ideology into a core tenet of

United States domestic and foreign policy. We need to know more about early American anti-communism to understand how and why that happened.

More engagement with the substance and development of anti-communist ideas and practices is one way to start. Historians of anti-communism can follow the lead of historians of conservatism by taking seriously the ideas and beliefs of anti-communists and exploring how they changed over time. We have a great deal of this sort of research on Cold War liberal anti-communism, and historians have traced the paths to apostasy of numerous radical intellectuals; where are their inter-war counterparts? The story of how the CPUSA undermined the radical union Industrial Workers of the World, and made surviving Wobblies into sworn communist-haters, remains to be fully told. Likewise, we need more research about experience with communism and communists created anti-communists. Histories of anti-communism often proceed as if it can be understood in isolation, but we need to know more about the dynamic relationship between local Communist Parties and anti-communist activists, where they existed. Workplaces and labor union meetings were key sites of engagement; leftist and pacifist movements were another. Finally, more transnational and comparative research is sorely needed. There is little integration of scholarship on interwar anti-communist movements in Europe, South America, Asia, or Africa with the American literature. How did national or regional anti-communist movements differ? What was the role of institutions like the Catholic and Protestant Churches? We know a lot about the role of agencies such as the CIA in fomenting anti-communist politics; what other organizations and entities operated across borders? Tracing the political diaspora of anti-Bolshevik Russians would be a useful effort. . Ayn Rand, daughter of a dispossessed Russian businessman, is just one example: she emigrated to the United States in 1926, at the age of 21; by the mid-1930s, living in the heart of New Deal Hollywood, she had begun writing the novels that would win the hearts and minds of many millions to her distinctive brand of passionate anti-communism.

Generations of historians, and volumes such as *Little 'Red Scares'*, have done much to expose the invidious ends and disingenuous tactics of American anti-communists. What remains to be explained is not the noxious aspects of anti-communism, but the appealing ones. What accounts for the remarkable tenacity and popularity of an ideology that was notorious for its abuses from the start? And why did its reputation decline so precipitously in popular memory? Making sense of modern American politics requires us to consider these questions anew.

Notes

1. Raymond Batvinis, *The Origins of FBI Counterintelligence* (Lawrence, KS, 2007); and *ibid.*, *Hoover's Secret War Against Axis Spies: FBI Counterespionage During World War II* (Lawrence, KS, 2014.). [Back to \(1\)](#)

Source URL: <https://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1730>

Links

[1] <https://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/117926>