

# OMINOUS COMMUNIST FIFTH COLUMNISTS: THE MAKING OF MCCARTHYISM AND THE SECOND RED SCARE

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On March 26, 1947, in a testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover laid out the prevalent world-view towards American communism. In the testimony, Hoover asserted that, “The Communist movement in the United States... stands for the destruction of our American form of government; it stands for the destruction of American democracy; it stands for the destruction of free enterprise; and it stands for the creation of a ‘Soviet of the United States’ and ultimate world revolution”. Hoover was not alone in having these views. The supposedly unprecedented danger that Communism posed to the American way of life became a mania that percolated throughout the whole society. This paranoia formed the period known as the ‘Second Red Scare’ of late 1940s until the middle 1950s. The Communist ‘witch hunt’ targeted all levels of the United States from the local schoolteacher to the highest reaches of the American government. The drive to root out not just the miniscule number of Soviet spies, but also the much larger Communist Party and its sympathizers, was far from spontaneous. Anti-Communism pervaded much of the American public at this time, spearheaded especially by a loose coalition of politicians, businesses, religious and patriotic orders, and investigation agencies. This undercurrent, combined with unsettling international events, allowed the Second Red Scare to explode into the spotlight. The emergence and perpetuation of the Red Scare was a result of the long-standing anti-Communist sentiment in America taking advantage of the setbacks in the early years of the Cold War.

The Second Red Scare represented the culmination of a decades-long backlash against groups,

people, and ideas that were seen as un-American. It was a reaction to the twentieth century that had – up to that point – been incredibly destabilizing for the United States. At the opening of the century, the nation seemed on the brink of insurrection, with radical leaders like Luigi Galleani leading the Anarchist charge against the American political and economic system. The 1901 assassination of President McKinley was the first in a series of killings and bombings by Anarchists during the period. The 1917 Russian Revolution highlighted the danger that a small cadre of disciplined radicals could pose to the established order, a fact that critics of Anarchism, and later Communism, would not miss. The terrible general strikes and race riots of 1919 seemed to signal, in the minds of many conservative Americans, an attempted Bolshevik coup in the United States. Although the prophesized 1920 May Day Revolution failed to materialize and the Palmer Raids showed themselves to be superfluous, anti-Communism was not significantly set back. In fact, the events of 1919-1920 not only focused public attention on the Communist threat, but also allowed leading anti-Communists to begin to widen the scope of potential ‘subversives’ past the stereotypical ‘bomb-throwing Anarchists’ to other groups and individuals. When the Second Red Scare emerged in the late 1940s, they would be the new targets.

The first of these groups were the country’s labor unions. The general strikes of 1919 hailed an emergence of radical unions in America. The International Workers of the World, formed in 1905, was joined by various Communist-led unions during the 1920s and 30s. The conservative labor community responded by denouncing these organizations. In

1934, American Federation of Labor (AFL) president, William Green, contended that Communism's mission was to coopt labor unions and create "a revolutionary organization to overthrow American economic and political institutions". The public mood and the rank-and-file of the major unions tolerated suspected Communists during the 1930s, but as anti-Communism reemerged after the Second World War, the toleration dried up. In an effort to get out in front of the Communist issue, the AFL and its rival, the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) took draconian steps to purge their organizations of alleged Communists. The CIO realigned its traditional radical leftist worldview towards vehemently opposing the Soviets on the world stage and Communists within its own ranks. The Taft-Hartley Act, which had so diminished the power of the unions, was appropriated by them to use against their Communist members. The CIO went further in proving its anti-Communist credentials by ousting several allegedly Communist-led unions from its membership. The story of anti-Communism and American unions serve to show how the tenor of the times forced even the left-leaning segments of the population to become accomplices of the Red Scare furor.

The backlash against American Communists was not restricted to the unions. To complement President Truman's loyalty program, the Attorney General created a list of organizations that were deemed subversive, Communistic, or advocated unconstitutional change of the American political system. The list – expanded from 93 to 197 organizations between 1847 and 1950 – included youth leagues; ethnic and religious groups; civil rights organizations; Socialist, Communist, or Fascist parties; and radical labor unions. J. Edgar Hoover argued that Communists infiltrated hundreds of organizations for "the promotion of Soviet war and peace aims, the exploitation of Negroes in the United States, work among foreign-language, and to secure a favorable viewpoint towards the Communists in domestic, political, social, and economic issues". To those who believed what Hoover was saying, it would have seemed as if a great number of groups were secretly subverting the American way of life. Senator Joseph McCarthy epitomized the feeling in his 1950 Wheeling speech by reminding his audi-

ence that, "we are not dealing with spies who get thirty pieces of silver to steal the blueprints of a new weapon". In effect, the 'War on Communism' was not simply against paid spies from Moscow, but also against the threat from Americans who would attempt to nudge American public opinion and policy to the advantage of Communists and the Soviet Union. The Hollywood blacklist provides an example of how the sliding definition of a threat came to be applied to individuals who were suspected, not necessarily of advocating the overthrow of the American government, but of belonging to the Communist Party or of presumed sister organizations. The Hollywood Ten were famous for refusing to admit or deny belonging to such a group; as a result, they were cited in contempt of Congress and were blacklisted from the film industry. These and other examples show the all-encompassing nature of the Second Red Scare. Traditional opponents of the scare-mongering became willing accomplices in an attempt to shield themselves from charges of Communist sympathies.

The anti-Communist paranoia was often stoked by groups and individuals who had a vested interest in the issue. Some of the most vocal anti-Communists, for example, were Catholics. Soviet persecution of Catholics in Eastern Europe pushed the Church to become bitterly hostile to anyone who seemed sympathetic to the Soviet cause. The American Legion, a veterans group founded in the aftermath of the First World War, was also a persistent foe of American Communism. They sought to inform the public about the Communist menace and to promote patriotism and Americanism as the best defense against subversion. Many organizations took it upon themselves to root out Communists, often as a means to deflect criticism from hardline anti-Communists. Hollywood and labor unions have previously been mentioned, but schools, legal institutions, and the government itself were all fixated on purging themselves of any suspected Communists.

When President Truman vetoed the McCarran Internal Security Bill, he called it "a mockery of the Bill of Rights" and "a long step towards totalitarianism" The veto was overturned by a huge margin. How was it that the President of the United States was not able to prevent the passage of such a reac-

tionary bill? The domestic factors examined above only provide part of the answer. The anti-Communist sentiment and the network of anti-Communist groups and accomplices set the stage for the Second Red Scare, but it alone could not spark the nationwide paranoia of the period. The Cold War developments, and the subsequent security panic was just the spark that was needed.

The first of these events occurred in 1949, along the steppes on modern-day Kazakhstan, with the detonation of RDS-1, the Soviet Union's first atomic bomb. The news of the test sent shockwaves throughout the United States. The American public had been conditioned to view the Soviets as technologically backwards and incapable of producing an atomic weapon until the early or middle 1950s. It was clear that they had received information from 'Atomic Spies' involved in the Manhattan Project. The most prominent spy picked up by United States intelligence services was Julius Rosenberg and his wife, Ethel Rosenberg. The severity of the betrayal was clear. Judge Irving Kaufman, who would hand down the death sentence to the Rosenbergs, stated, "We must realize that we are dealing with a missile of destruction which can wipe out millions of Americans". He further condemned them, stating, "I consider your crime worse than murder". The unprecedented fear of nuclear war – a scenario only possible due to the actions of individuals like the Rosenbergs – raised the stakes of failing to stop Communist infiltration.

Likely the most famous (or infamous) aspect of the Second Red Scare relates to the investigation of Communist influence within the government of the United States. Prior to 1949, there had been occasional investigations and hearings into potential Communist influences within the government, particularly the State Department. The most famous of such cases was that of Alger Hiss, a liberal assistant to the Assistant Secretary of State who was charged for espionage and convicted of perjury. The government investigations would hit their stride following news that China had fallen to the Communist forces of Mao Zedong. The shocking collapse of the Nationalist forces under Chiang Kai-shek opened the government up to scrutiny about harboring Communists; conservative politicians were loath to admit that Chiang's corrupt and inept administration

was responsible for the revolution. The so-called 'China Lobby' attacked the Truman administration for supposedly harboring Communist sympathizers, like John Stewart Service and Owen Lattimore, in the State Department. Indeed, the two men in question had written scathing attacks on Chiang's government while stationed in the Far East during the war. Service was accused of handing sensitive documents concerning Far Eastern policy to the Pro-Communist China journal *Amerasia* but was not convicted. The failure to clamp down on Service proved, in the minds of Joseph McCarthy and his ilk, were 'soft on Communism'. McCarthy used Service's activities to propel himself into the political spotlight, which also put the Truman administration and Democrats on the defensive. These charges forced many liberals unwillingly to join the anti-Communist coalition, in the hopes of not being accused, themselves, of harboring Communist sympathies.

The final ingredient to create the Red Scare mania was the Korean War. The Korean War silenced much of the opposition to the anti-Communist crusade. Typical wartime measures to limit freedom of speech were employed regularly. The Alien Registration Act of 1940, for example, was revived and used against leaders of the Communist Party to great effect. Author of the majority opinion, Chief Justice Fred Vinson, noted that "Certainly an attempt to overthrow the Government by force, even though doomed from the outset...is a sufficient evil for Congress to prevent". He went on to state, "It is the existence of the conspiracy which creates the danger... If the ingredients of the reaction are present, we cannot bind the government to wait until the catalyst is added". The Chief Justice was saying that, in times such as those in which he lived, the threat of violent revolution was enough to warrant repression. He was not alone in his opinion. The wartime fever had infected the whole country, giving the Second Red Scare exactly what it needed to perpetuate itself.

The anti-Communist feeling of twentieth century America, combined with early Cold War developments, allowed for the development and propagation of the fear and paranoia of the Second Red Scare. The legacy of America anti-Communism encompassed a broad mania of radical and subversive

groups. Labor unions and other leftist groups were targeted, forcing them to become complicit in the acts by purging their ranks of alleged Communists. A broad coalition of anti-Communists were instrumental in pressuring organizations to take a tougher stand against the supposed threat. The catalyst for many of the worst abuses came as a result of the ramping up of the Cold War. The detonation of the first Soviet nuclear weapon produced a furor over atomic spies. The Chinese Communist Revolution created a panic regarding Communist infiltration of the State Department specifically, and the government more generally. Finally, the Korean War provided the McCarthyites with the patriotic cover to advocate for a quashing of dissent. The measures that ended up being employed against subversives in the United States may have been largely hysterical, but the mood of the period more than warranted that overreaction.

## Endnotes

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