Anticommunist Hysteria

The Cold War, 2000
From U.S. History in Context

SOVIET ESPIONAGE

During the Cold War, adversarial states employed a variety of means to further their quest for national security and to gain advantage over rival nations. Among these means were spying and intelligence gathering.

Well before the onset of the Cold War, the Soviet Union developed a sophisticated and determined campaign of spying and infiltration against the Western powers, particularly Great Britain and the United States. Taking advantage of the openness of the Western democracies, as well as the communist adherence or sympathies of some key British and American citizens, the Soviet Union gleaned crucial information on political and technological developments.

When revelations of Soviet spying became public in the West, a wave of anticommunist hysteria set in during the first decade of the Cold War. Already angered by the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe, and stunned by the "fall" of China to communism, millions of Americans now came to believe not only that Soviet-led communism menaced world order, but that it threatened the security of the United States itself. Americans overreacted, conducting a reckless purge of government, businesses, universities, and other arenas of both private and public life in a prolonged campaign against alleged domestic subversion.

The campaign uncovered some genuine spies, but it also destroyed the lives of many more innocent individuals, gave rise to many demagogues in national politics, and turned the nation sharply to the right, thereby narrowing the boundaries of political debate in the United States. On the whole, it constituted the single greatest assault on civil liberties in U.S. history.

VENONA

In the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, declassification of top-secret records of the Venona Project—a program of U.S. government-decoded intercepts of Soviet intelligence transmissions during World War II (1939-1945)—revealed that there had in fact been an extensive network of Soviet spies in the West. Ironically, American scholars began to learn about Venona during the 1990s not in Washington, DC, but in the Moscow archives of the new Russia, following the breakup of the Soviet Union. Only after these scholars and public officials pointed out this embarrassing irony did the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Security Agency (NSA) cooperate in declassifying thousands of World War II-era U.S. records documenting the history of domestic spying and subversion.

The Venona documents, FBI files, and Russian records reveal a substantial Soviet campaign of espionage against the United States during World War II. Moreover, perhaps 200 to more than 300 members of the Communist Party USA, rather than content merely to advocate an ideological position, participated directly in Soviet espionage activities. They did so because, naive about the horrors of Stalinism, they remained true believers in communism, with the Soviet Union as its vanguard. Although U.S. communists knew they were divulging state secrets, they may not have viewed their actions as treasonous insofar as many of their activities took place at a time when the United States and the Soviet Union were wartime allies in the mutual struggle against fascist aggression.

Communist spies in the United States did real damage, however, by enhancing the Soviet capability of competing
with the West in the arena of military technology. There seems little doubt that Klaus Fuchs (1912-1988), Julius Rosenberg (1918-1953), and other atomic-energy spies enabled the USSR to avoid many of the time-consuming mistakes and trial-and-error procedures that American scientists weathered in the ultimately successful quest to develop atomic weapons.

Estimates vary, but it appears that spies enabled the Soviet Union to develop the atomic bomb at least two to three years in advance of what might otherwise have been expected. American spies also helped the Soviets bridge a technological gap in the development of jet engines and jet aircraft. Radar was yet another Western technological advantage that the Soviets closed in on as a result of espionage.

Although the earlier-than-expected Soviet development of such technologies had little long-term impact on the course of history, the revelations of Soviet spying heightened Cold War tensions and precipitated a repressive crusade against the American political left. By the time domestic communism emerged as a dramatic national issue, what damage there had been to national security already had been done.

A HISTORY OF ANTICOMMUNISM

Domestic anticommunism peaked in the first decade of the Cold War, but the movement had been in existence since the mid-19th century, when the German intellectual Karl Marx (1818-1883) founded the communist movement. In the wake of World War I (1914-1918) and the Bolshevik Revolution (1917) in Russia, the U.S. government cracked down, often in violation of civil liberties, against alleged radicals, thousands of whom were jailed or, in the cases of immigrants, deported. Congressional hearings on domestic communism continued into the pre-World War II years, but it was the Cold War that triggered a national obsession with domestic security.

The anticommunist movement served the purposes of political conservatism on domestic issues as well. Conservative elites had been badly unnerved by the power of President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882-1945), who defeated Republican candidates in an unprecedented four straight presidential elections beginning in 1932. Conservative critics equated Roosevelt's New Deal with creeping socialism. His programs had in fact lacked any such consistent focus, however, constituting instead a hodgepodge, and somewhat desperate effort at that, to achieve relief and recovery in the midst of the Great Depression.

In the first years after World War II, anticommunist crusaders began to depict the 1945 Yalta Conference, initially considered a great triumph of wartime diplomacy, as a forum for appeasement of the USSR. According to this view, President Roosevelt's aides, including Alger Hiss (1904-1996), a prominent diplomat present at the conference, had spurred a sellout of the national interest by allowing Soviet hegemony over Eastern Europe. Hiss also played a part in establishing the United Nations, which many conservatives believed worked against the interests of U.S. foreign policy.

LOYALTY REVIEWS

President Harry S. Truman (1884-1972) knew that most of the charges of government subversion were nonsense, but he encouraged the excesses by launching a loyalty review program for federal employees in 1947. The powers of the federal government, especially the FBI under staunch antiradical J. Edgar Hoover (1895-1972), now weighed in on behalf of a determined search to root out communists and communist sympathizers—called "fellow travelers"—within government service. Such programs received widespread public support—including from many liberals who were also staunch anticommunists; other than leftist targets themselves, few people dared to oppose these policies.
The campaign had already expanded into private business and industry, including Hollywood. Congress investigated the alleged communist sympathies of hundreds of actors, directors, screenwriters, and other members of the movie industry, calling many of them to Washington, DC, for hearings in which they were asked if they were now or ever had been members of the Communist Party. Some Hollywood figures declined to answer that question, invoking their constitutional rights to free speech and association and against self-incrimination. Several of them were jailed, but more typically these artists were placed on a Hollywood blacklist, meaning that none of the major studios would employ them or use their work as a result of their alleged past or present radical affiliations. Many who were blacklisted had to move to Europe or use pseudonyms, where feasible, in order to continue working; a few had fatal heart attacks or committed suicide. For years, the only way to get off the blacklist was to admit one's own "guilt" and name others who were known or suspected communists; there were also many conservatives in the movie industry who eagerly identified suspected radicals and helped drive them out of Hollywood. Longtime friendships often ended abruptly, and bitter recriminations from this period lasted into the new millennium.

More than any other department or agency, the FBI spearheaded the investigations, hearings, prosecutions, and loyalty reviews designed to unearth leftists and drive them from government, business, and industry. The federal government itself thus orchestrated a campaign undermining the civil liberties of thousands of Americans, the overwhelming majority of whom were not and never had been spies or criminals. Many of them had been members of the Communist Party USA or of various affiliated organizations, especially during the Depression years, but such political affiliations had been within their constitutional rights.

IMPACT OF THE FALL OF CHINA

While the issue of domestic subversion rumbled across the political landscape during and immediately after World War II, one key event set the movement aflame. That event was the "loss" of China to Mao Zedong (1893-1976; Mao Tse-tung in the older Wade-Giles system of spelling) and the communists, after a long and bloody civil war.

The United States had committed itself during and after the war to the corrupt and hapless nationalist regime of Generalissimo Jiang Jieshi (1887-1975; Chiang Kai-shek in Wade-Giles spelling). Despite several millions of dollars in aid, Jiang's government eventually succumbed to the superior organization and tactics of Mao's communists. Although the United States had done all it could to prevent the outcome in China, Americans reacted hysterically to the event and went in search of scapegoats at home.

Right-wing politicians in both parties blamed the State Department for the loss of China. They averred that a group of U.S. diplomats based in China during World War II had impeded Jiang, thus paving the way for the communist triumph. However absurd, the argument that a small group of disloyal Americans had willfully lost China assumed some resonance with the American public, which grasped for an explanation as to how the high expectations of victory in World War II had given way to such insecurity in world affairs. The loss of the most populous nation in the world to communism had been frightening enough, yet in the same year the Soviets successfully tested an atomic weapon. A year later the Korean War (1950-1953) erupted. In the wake of these events, fear of communism had never been greater.

SENSATIONAL SPY CASES

The existence of actual spies, particularly those who had infiltrated the nation's atomic-energy program, encouraged the national obsession with domestic security. Investigations did reveal that American, British, and Canadian spy rings, particularly during World War II, had delivered atomic secrets to the Soviet Union.

Sensational cases in the early 1950s fueled feverish media attention, riveting the public interest. The Hiss case,
relentlessly pursued by a young California congressman, Richard M. Nixon (1913-1994), culminated with Hiss's conviction for perjury, for lying about his alleged past Communist Party membership. (Venona documents strongly suggest, but do not conclusively prove, that Hiss was in fact guilty of espionage.)

Even more compelling, both in the United States and around the world, was the case of Julius Rosenberg and his wife, Ethel (1916-1953). Clearly Julius had served as an atomic spy for the Soviet Union. His wife loyally supported her husband but apparently was not an active spy herself. Nevertheless, both Rosenbergs, the parents of two young children, were put to death in the electric chair for treason in 1953. They were the only two Americans executed for treason during the Cold War.

ENTER MCCARTHY

By the time of the Rosenbergs' execution, anticommunist hysteria was in full swing. Led by the FBI, but also bolstered by state and local governments as well as private industry, the nation embarked on a relentless quest to extirpate radicalism. Although public officials, private leaders, and the press encouraged and promoted the movement, a single individual took center stage from 1950 until 1954. That individual was Senator Joseph McCarthy (1908-1957), a Wisconsin Republican.

McCarthy actually was a late entrant, though a most spectacular one, to be sure, into the arena of anticommunist hysteria. McCarthy repeatedly employed the tactic of the "Big Lie," claiming over and over to possess evidence—which in fact he did not have—of an "immense" communist conspiracy to bring down the U.S. government. On one occasion, he said he had the names of 205 known members of the Communist Party who were still working for the State Department (though the exact number kept changing, and in the end he never uncovered a single proven subversive). The Republican junior senator from Wisconsin employed equally ruthless associates who joined him in trampling the civil liberties of actual or suspected leftists in investigations and highly publicized congressional hearings. Those who condemned his demagoguery often became targets themselves, accused of being soft on communism—or worse.

Despite his recklessness, McCarthy's campaign of anticommunist hysteria lasted four years, because it served the purpose of Cold War zealots and conservatives, such as magazine editor William F. Buckley (b. 1925), who were determined to undermine the legacy of New Deal liberalism. President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890-1969), elected in 1953, and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles (1888-1959), looked the other way as McCarthy led the purge of Roosevelt appointees from the State Department and other federal agencies. The anticommunist hysteria also created a chilling effect that curbed dissent on controversial Cold War issues.

McCarthy ultimately self-destructed by carrying his campaign to absurd levels. He called into question the loyalty of high military officials, including the former wartime Army chief of staff and secretary of state under Truman, George C. Marshall (1880-1959)—the architect of the highly successful anticommunist Marshall Plan. After McCarthy publicly smeared a young lawyer with only the most peripheral connection to the nationally televised congressional hearings under way in 1954, Army counsel Joseph Welch (1890-1960) asked McCarthy, "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?" Under the glare of television cameras, the McCarthy movement rapidly disintegrated. Condemned by the Senate before year's end, the junior senator left politics and drank himself to death a few years later.

A TURN TO THE RIGHT

McCarthy had served his purpose, however. The postwar campaign had succeeded in purging the left, not just from government but throughout American society. The excesses of the movement, so clearly evident by the mid-1950s, could now be attributed to a single unstable individual (the excesses of the period, in fact, became
known as McCarthyism) without discrediting the movement as a whole.

For every genuine spy such as Fuchs or Rosenberg, hundreds of people guilty only of ideological deviation became victimized. Prominent, patriotic Americans—men such as the brilliant physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer (1904-1967), director of the wartime Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bomb; and the loyal diplomat John Paton Davies (1908-1999), a leading China expert—were discredited and forced out of government service for past leftist affiliations or, in the case of Davies, on trumped-up charges.

For every well-known victim, however, there were hundreds, if not thousands, of obscure men and women driven from their jobs and even from their homes solely on the basis of their past leftist affiliations, real or imagined. The knock on the door by an FBI agent could mark the beginning of a career and life destroyed. The anticommunist hysteria of postwar America became a nightmare of jobs lost, families divided, blacklists compiled, hearings held on the flimsiest of charges, constitutional rights denied, and in some respects most odious of all: intense pressure to ensure the misery of others by "naming names."

The damage done by the wave of anticommunist hysteria in the United States exceeded the damage actually perpetrated by American and Soviet spies in wartime. The counter-subversive crusade destroyed thousands of lives, compromised civil liberties, reinforced ideological orthodoxy, and encouraged anti-intellectualism and fear of foreign contacts.

The right-wing backlash ensured that a variety of progressive causes that American communists and leftists had long joined in advocating—civil rights for African Americans, rights for labor unions, national health care, and other social reforms—were put on the back burner. Blacklists, bans, and book burnings stifled dissent and artistic expression.

Far from a justifiable response to threats to national security, the anticommunist hysteria of the postwar period represents the most sustained era of political repression in U.S. history. It could never have happened in the absence of the fears and anxieties brought on by the Cold War.

Further Readings

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