Communism and National Security: The Menace Emerges

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The restored tolerance for American communism that grew out of the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union did not long survive the victory over Hitler in the spring of 1945. Though there was an ostensible revival of the Popular Front collaboration between Communists and liberals during the war, it was a temporary and essentially superficial phenomenon. The party's patriotism did little to overcome the hostility of its traditional enemies or make it any more popular with the general public. And once World War II ended and the cold war began, the Communist party again came under attack.

This time, however, because of the struggle against the Soviet Union, anticommunism moved to the ideological center of American politics. The cold war transformed domestic communism from a matter of political opinion to one of national security. As the United States' hostility toward the Soviet Union intensified, members of the Communist party came increasingly to be viewed as potential enemy agents. Since that perception was to provide the justification for so much that happened during the McCarthy period, it is important to examine its development in some detail.

The cold war began even before the fighting stopped. At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, Roosevelt had tried to negotiate an amicable postwar settlement with Stalin, but after FDR's death in April, American policymakers became concerned about the Soviet Union's obvious attempt to dominate the areas of Eastern Europe that its army controlled. As crisis followed crisis over the next few years, the world hovered on the verge of war. Each emergency heightened the tension. First came disagreements over the composition of the Polish government in 1945, then Soviet pressure on Turkey and Iran in 1946, the Greek Civil War in 1947, the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia and blockade of Berlin in 1948, the Communist takeover in China and the Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb in 1949, and, finally, the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. At first Truman and his advisers vacillated between hoping to conciliate the Soviets and trying to strong-arm them, but by the beginning of 1946 most of the nation's policymakers had come to see the Soviet Union as a hostile power committed to a program of worldwide expansion that only the United States was strong enough to resist. This may not have been the case. Though there is no question about the horrendous repression Stalin imposed on his own people, his foreign policy may well have been motivated by a desire for security rather than conquest. Whether or not it was, American policymakers never tried to find out, assuming on the basis of the Nazi experience that totalitarian states by definition threatened the stability of the international system.

Similar assumptions pervaded the growing consensus about the dangers of American communism. Part myth and part reality, the notion that domestic Communists threatened national security was based on a primarily ideological conception of the nature of the Communist movement. The sense of urgency that surrounded the issue of communism came from the government's attempt to mobilize public opinion for the cold war. But the content, the way in which the Communist threat was defined, owed much to formulations that the anti-Communist network had pushed for years. J. Edgar Hoover's 1947 testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee, is an example of this type of thinking, of the vision of communism that came to shape most people's perceptions of the Red Menace. It conformed to the similarly demonized view of the Soviet Union held by the Truman administration and its supporters. Though distorted in many ways, the perception of an internal Communist threat had just enough plausibility to be convincing--especially to the vast majority of Americans who had no direct contact with the party or its members. Above all, it legitimated the

McCarthy era repression by dehumanizing American Communists and transforming them into ideological outlaws who deserved whatever they got.

Communist party members were believed to be part of a secret conspiracy, fanatics who would automatically do whatever Stalin told them to do. Though a wildly exaggerated caricature, the image did have some basis in reality. After all, the American Communist party was a highly disciplined organization that did have a connection to the Soviet Union. Whether or not it actually got orders from Moscow, its leaders certainly tried to ensure that the party's policies would be in accord with those of the Kremlin, at least on major issues. It was thus possible to view the congruence between the party's line and the Soviet Union's positions as evidence of dictation.

The notion that individual Communists were under Moscow's control had less basis in reality. True, some party members did display a Stalinist rigidity, following every zig and zag of the party line with unquestioning devotion. And many Communists did behave in what could be seen as a conspiratorial fashion, especially when they tried to conceal their Political affiliation. Nonetheless, most party members were neither so rigid nor so secretive. They did not see themselves as soldiers in Stalin's army, but as American radicals committed to a program of social and political change that would eventually produce what they hoped would be a better society. Even at its peak, the Communist party had a high turnover rate; and by the early 1950s, most of the people who had once been in the party had quit, proving that they were hardly the ideological zombies they were commonly portrayed as. Nonetheless, the assumption that all Communists followed the party line all the time was to structure and justify the political repression of the McCarthy period.

Just as there was a kernel of plausibility in the demonized image of the American Communist, so too was it conceivable that individual Communists, acting as subversives, spies, and saboteurs, could threaten American security. Protecting the nation from these alleged dangers was to become the primary justification for much of what happened during the McCarthy period. The dangers were enormously exaggerated, but they were not wholly fictitious.

Ironically, even though the party's leaders were to go to jail in the 1950s because they had supposedly advocated the violent overthrow of the American government, no one in any position of responsibility seriously worried that the party would mount a successful revolution. A far more tangible danger was the possibility that individual Communists in sensitive positions could subtly influence the nation's foreign policy or undermine its ability to defend itself. There was no evidence that this had happened. But conspiracy theories blossomed, circulated primarily by Republican politicians and their allies who wanted to discredit the Democratic party and the New Deal. Most of these theories involved charges that Communists had infiltrated the State Department, where they induced FDR to give Poland to Stalin at the Yalta Conference in 1945 and then betrayed China to the Communists. Though these allegations had no basis in reality, there were enough tidbits of circumstantial evidence for people like Joe McCarthy to build their careers (and ruin those of others) by creating apparently convincing scenarios.

Communist spies were, however, a genuine threat. Though never powerful enough to influence government policy, individual Communists could easily have stolen secrets--and some of them did. The notorious spy cases of the early cold war bolstered the contention that, as J. Edgar Hoover maintained, "every American Communist was, and is, potentially an espionage agent of the Soviet Union." The ramifications of these cases were considerable, even though exactly what Elizabeth Bentley, Alger Hiss, or Julius and Ethel Rosenberg did or did not do may never be known. Nonetheless, there is enough evidence, mainly from people who either confessed or were caught in the act, to make it clear that some American, British, and Canadian citizens in or near the Communist party did spy for the Soviet Union and did so for political reasons. Most of them were active during World War II at a time when Russia and the United States were on the same side, and they apparently believed that they were helping the Allied cause It is unlikely that the Soviet Union recruited

spies from the party during the cold war once communism had become anathematized and the government had eliminated its left-wing employees.

Though the threat of espionage gained national attention, sabotage was the prime concern of policymakers. They feared that Communist-led unions might go on strike or otherwise impede the operations of the nation's vital defense industries. Here, too, the fear was wildly exaggerated. But there were Just enough elements of reality to give it plausibility. Although a party-dominated union like the Fur and Leather Workers posed little threat to national security, the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE) and the various maritime unions were more strategically positioned. During the Nazi-Soviet Pact period, Communist labor leaders had been involved in several highly publicized strikes in the nation's defense industries. Part of a nationwide organizing drive mounted by unions of all political persuasions, the work stoppages were triggered by economic grievances, not a desire to impede the nation's war effort. Nonetheless, because Communists had been active, these strikes were cited during the early years of the cold war as evidence that the party had tried to sabotage American rearmament. The possibility of similar job actions in the event of a conflict with the Soviet Union could easily justify cracking down on the left-led unions.

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