



**John Earl Haynes, “The Cold War Debate Continues: A Traditionalist View of Historical Writing on Domestic Communism and Anti-Communism,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Volume 2, Issue 1 (Winter 2000): 76-115.**

Commentary by **Ellen W. Schrecker**, University of Yeshiva<sup>1</sup>  
*Published by H-Diplo on 18 December 2000*

Will the domestic Cold War never end? As historians, can't we just call a truce and examine whatever pieces of the historical record challenge us intellectually without having to take sides? Apparently not. The title of John Earl Haynes's recent review essay in the *Journal of Cold War Studies*, “The Cold War Debate Continues,” says it all. The piece not only describes the debate but engages in it as well. To be fair, the subtitle identifies the article as a “traditionalist view,” thus warning readers that the author has not produced the usual more or less disinterested survey of the scholarly literature on domestic communism and anticommunism, but a partisan defense of his and his collaborators' own work. Even so, I'm not sure why the controversy continues or why Haynes assumes that it will do so “for many years to come.”[i] Increasingly redolent of political antiquarianism, the controversy about communism and anticommunism may have run out of steam—at least in most mainstream venues. When I debated Ronald Radosh at Harvard last spring, it was before a smattering of partisans and friends that included few people under the age of forty.

Actually, Haynes and I are not always in disagreement. Along with all other historians of communism and anticommunism, I owe him an enormous debt for his devoted labor in compiling regular bibliographical surveys of recent work in the field for the Newsletter of the Historians of American Communism. I also agree with his periodization of the field and even, for the most part, with his characterization of much of the scholarship within it. His distinction between traditionalists and revisionists makes considerable sense, though one could — especially as we reach the present — affix political labels as well. In addition, he is largely, though not entirely, correct in ascribing to each of the generations (he calls them “waves”) a specific problematic that more often than not arises from that generation's own political experiences.

Haynes' genealogy is straightforward. In the 1950s and early 60s the founding generation of anticommunist traditionalists sought to defuse the red-baiting of liberals by Joseph McCarthy and his allies. Presumably if they exposed American communism as what one of my physicist friends calls a “piffle plague” and showed how tainted and marginal it really was, they would be demonstrating their own anticommunist credentials while depriving McCarthy et al. of theirs. The second generation revisionists of the late 60s and early 70s derived their agenda from opposing the Vietnam War. They turned against the Cold War liberalism of their predecessors, showed little interest in communism, and focused, instead, on the domestic manifestations of Cold War anticommunism. The third generation of scholars, many of whom had emerged from

---

<sup>1</sup> An H-Diplo posting by Sam Tanenhaus regarding a reference to his *New York Review of Books* review of Schrecker's book is attached to the end of this review.

the New Left in the late 1970s and 80s, returned to the study of communism, but this time, with a few exceptions, from a more sympathetic perspective. The dissolution of the Soviet bloc and the opening of the Kremlin archives brings us to the present wave of historiography, one dominated largely by the traditionalists who are using the new materials to, as Haynes puts it, “celebrate the West’s moral victory over the Soviet Union.”[ii]

Yet Haynes’ historiographic perspective is too narrow. Not only does he overlook some important work, but he also isolates his survey from the broader intellectual context within which the historians of American communism and anticommunism operated. During the early years of the Cold War, when questions of communism seemed so central to American politics, the issue engaged some of the best minds in the nation. Many of the people who wrote about American communism (often as part of the Ford Foundation’s Fund for the Republic project on “Communism in American Life”) were also card-carrying New York Intellectuals as well as members of the consensus school of history. Not only did they structure the early historical study of communism, but they also provided a template for understanding McCarthyism. For some reason, however, Haynes never mentions that aspect of their work, even though their interpretation, enshrined in a 1955 volume edited by Daniel Bell, still retains some influence. Reflecting that generation’s temporary infatuation with social psychology, its most effective proponent, the brilliant historian Richard Hofstadter, argued - with little or no empirical evidence - that McCarthyism represented a marginal and essentially irrational “pseudo-Conservative revolt,” motivated in large part by the status anxieties of upwardly mobile ethnics and downwardly mobile WASPs.[iii]

Besides overlooking his own traditionalist predecessors’ interpretation of McCarthyism, Haynes also overlooks the very first group of scholars who wrote about that phenomenon. Subsidized by the Rockefeller Foundation, these men and women-Eleanor Bontecou, Vern Countryman, and Walter Gellhorn among them-published studies of the federal government’s loyalty-security programs, state investigations, and the early history of HUAC that, though written in the early 1950s, have in many instances yet to be superseded.[iv] Neither pro-Communists nor anti-Communists, these legal scholars and civil libertarians represent an important early school of scholarly writing about communism and anticommunism that does not fit within Haynes’ polarized view of the field. They shared the traditionalists’ perception of the marginality of communism, but worried about how the drive to eliminate it would affect free speech and the rights of individuals.

Since the work of these people in most cases actually \_predates\_ that of Haynes’ traditionalists, it would be hard to classify them as “revisionists.” Still, the concern for civil liberties that pervades their work is something that the later historians whom Haynes does identify as revisionists, like Robert Griffith, Richard Freeland, Athan Theoharis, and David Cate, also display.[v] But those later scholars also subscribe to the historical revisionism that emerged in the late 1960s to reexamine the origins of the Cold War and other aspects of what came to be labeled as corporate liberalism. Ironically, most of these revisionists were firmly traditional in their methodology; they were doing standard political or diplomatic history, exploring the anticommunism of the early Cold War from the top down.

Such was not the case with Haynes' next generation, the men and women who wrote about American communism in the late 1970s and after. With social history in ascendance, it was no accident that these scholars would look mainly at the party's rank-and-file. Again, like the second-generation revisionists, they are part of a broader movement among American historians who, taking off from the pioneering work of E. P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman, sought to examine the past from the bottom up. Most of them had, as Haynes correctly notes, a political agenda dominated by the New Left's explicit search for a useable past as well as the more inclusionary vision of historical agency that was to fuel the development of entire fields of inquiry like African American and women's history.

Today, with the historical profession itself beginning to split over both politics and methodology, the traditionalists who dominate Haynes' own fourth-wave cohort find their niche within the growing oeuvre of the "We-Now-Know" school of post-revisionist Cold War history. How the end of the Cold War will ultimately affect our understanding of American communism and anticommunism remains to be seen. Certainly, as far as Haynes and his colleagues are concerned, there seems to be little chance that it will transcend the politicization that has characterized it for the past fifty years.

But classifying scholars in accordance with their political programs or even their methodology may oversimplify matters, for the availability of sources can also determine the direction of historical research, especially with a subject so swathed in repression, deception, and secrecy. While Haynes rightly notes the importance of the opening of the former Soviet archives, their contents are not going to answer all our questions. To begin with, access is a problem, as Haynes and most of the historians who have used these materials admit. The Russians open and close their records almost at random. In addition, the American communist materials in Moscow, while voluminous for some periods, are scant indeed after the late 1930s. Unless some new caches appear, the archives will not add much to what we know about the party's history during the crucial early Cold War years.

In addition, Haynes overlooks other sources that may have been just as significant in shaping our understanding of American communism and anticommunism: FBI files, in particular, but also the many memoirs and oral histories of American Communists. Neither set of materials is without its problems, but they are both, in their very different ways, utterly indispensable, as valuable for giving us insight into the *mentalite* of key players as they are for the factual information they contain. Sophisticated historians know the need for a critical reading of a memo from J. Edgar Hoover or the memoirs of a longtime party leader like Peggy Dennis. But they also know the need for using as many different kinds of sources as possible.

Speaking of Hoover, perhaps the most serious omission in Haynes' survey is his failure to look at the scholarship on the FBI. Given how central the Bureau was in both providing information about American communism and coordinating much of the campaign against it, it is hard to understand why Haynes ignores it. Cross-dressing aside, there is little debate within the historical community about J. Edgar Hoover. Traditionalists like Richard Gid Powers and revisionists like Theoharis agree that the devious and reactionary FBI director disobeyed his superiors and engaged in illegal activities as he sought to increase his agency's power and stamp out communism. I am sure that Haynes does not condone Hoover's unconstitutional behavior,

nonetheless, it is striking that he fails to mention his name anywhere in the article. But surely no study of the historiography of American anticommunism would be complete without at least acknowledging the scholarship on the FBI's crucial role.[vi]

But Haynes is not, I think, particularly interested in anticommunism. Though he and I agree that the history of communism and anticommunism is "inextricably linked," he devotes little attention to the latter. There are perfectly valid reasons for such an omission, for it is one thing to assert the existence of such links and quite something else to examine them. There is simply too much information out there for scholars who are doing serious archival research to cover the entire waterfront. The operant phrase here is "specialization"; and whatever we think about the increasingly fragmented nature of our discipline, we have to recognize that it exists. The revisionists of the 1960s and early 70s did not write about communism, they were looking at anticommunism. Similarly, the men and women who studied rank-and-file Communists in the 1970s and later did not look at anticommunism. Thus, for example, Robin D. G. Kelley in his prize-winning book about Southern Communists during the Depression (which Haynes inexplicably ignores) did not devote much attention to the motivations and activities of the reactionary Southern racists who beat up the beleaguered Alabama Reds he was studying.[vii]

It is for that reason, among others, that I find Haynes' treatment of my own work misguided. I wrote primarily about anticommunism, not communism. True, I did pay some attention to the Communist party, largely because, like Haynes, I believe that we cannot understand what happened during the early Cold War without examining the ways in which the party's structure and activities shaped the political repression directed against it. In addition, because I was writing a synthetic account of the McCarthy era, rather than a monograph, I could not, and did not try to, offer more than a preliminary survey of areas that other scholars have yet to explore. Of course, most authors claim that their critics did not understand what they were trying to do. But, at least, one assumes they read with care the works they critique. If Haynes had done so, he would have noted that in the preface to the paperback edition of *Many Are the Crimes* I explicitly acknowledge that the 1999 publication of Allen Weinstein's *The Haunted Wood* finally convinced me of the guilt of the major communist spies. In a recent article for *The Nation* that, no doubt, appeared after Haynes' piece had gone to press, Maurice Isserman and I describe the significance of the new archival materials and how they have changed our view of Soviet espionage.[viii] There is now just too much evidence from too many different sources to make it possible for anyone but the most die-hard loyalists to argue convincingly for the innocence of Hiss, Rosenberg, and the others.

But, despite Haynes' insistence, espionage is not the main story of American communism and anticommunism. It is only part of a much more complicated story. If this were a legal case, guilt or innocence would suffice, but as historians, we need to go beyond such "facts" and look at the broader context within which this espionage occurred. Thus, for example, we need to understand (not judge, but understand) what motivated a left-wing New Deal official like Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Harry Dexter White to give information to the Soviet Union. In his important dissertation on White, Bruce Craig does just that. Not only does he examine the evidence about White's collaboration with the KGB, but he also looks at White's career and intellectual development, concluding that he was a dedicated Rooseveltian internationalist who gave information to the KGB because his "utopian vision of world peace" required a

“Soviet/American partnership.”[ix] As Craig so judiciously explains, it is just as important for our understanding of communism and anticommunism to investigate the content of that internationalism as it is to investigate the illegal actions it produced.

But, for some reason, complexity, nuance, and a willingness to see the world in other than black and white seem alien to Haynes’ view of history. He seems unable to accept an interpretation of American communism that looks at its achievements as well as its sins (I suppose Haynes would prefer the word, “crimes,” here). Accordingly, he treats those historians (myself, I presume, included) who do not subscribe to his prosecutorial perspective as apologists for the party. He does note the diversity of views within the revisionist camp, but then goes on to say that “despite these occasional disagreements, most of the revisionists shared a hostility to capitalism, anti-Communism, and the American constitutional order..They saw American Communists, whatever their faults, as kindred spirits in the fight against capitalism and established American institutions.”[x]

As a card-carrying member of the American Civil Liberties Union who undertook the study of McCarthyism precisely because of my opposition to its depredations against freedom of speech, I find such a characterization personally offensive. No doubt, if I were a Russian historian, I would be even more distressed about the repressive nature of that society. But, I’m not and - to be quite frank - it’s getting a little tiresome to have to explain yet again that in this country McCarthyism did more damage to the constitution than the American Communist party ever did.

## Notes

[i] John Earl Haynes, “The Cold War Debate Continues: A Traditionalist View of Historical Writing on Domestic Communism and Anti-Communism,” Journal of Cold War Studies 2, No. 2 (Winter 2000), 77.

[ii] Haynes, “Cold War Debate,” 114.

[iii] Richard Hofstadter, “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt,” in Daniel Bell, ed., The New American Right (New York: Criterion, 1955).

[iv] Eleanor Bontecou, The Federal Loyalty-Security Program (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1953); Walter Gellhorn, ed., The States and Subversion (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1952); Robert K. Carr, The House Committee on Un-American Activities (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1952); Edward Barrett, The Tenney Committee: Legislative Investigation of Subversive Activities in California (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1951); Lawrence H. Chamberlain, Loyalty and Legislative Action: A Survey of Activity by the New York State Legislature, 1919-1949 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1951); and Vern Countryman, Un-American Activities in the State of Washington (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1951).

[v] David Cauter, The Great Fear (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978); Robert Griffith The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate 2d ed. (1970; Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987); Athan Theoharis, Seeds of Repression: Harry S. Truman and the Origin of McCarthyism (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1971); and Richard Freeland, The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism (New York: Knopf, 1971).

[vi] Athan Theoharis, a revisionist, has been particularly diligent in tracing Hoover’s footsteps. See, in particular, Theoharis and John Stuart Cox, The Boss (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988). But the most thoughtful biography is that of the traditionalist Richard Gid Powers, Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover (New York: Free Press, 1987). See also Kenneth O’Reilly, Hoover and the Un-Americans: The FBI, HUAC, and the Red Menace (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983 ); Curt Gentry, J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets

## H-Diplo Article Commentary: Schrecker on Haynes

(New York: Norton, 1991) and Theoharis, ed., *Beyond the Hiss Case: The FBI, Congress, and the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982).

[vii] Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

[viii] Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999; orig. ed., New York: Little Brown, 1998), ix-x. Haynes is not the only critic of my book to take me to task for not having taken *The Haunted Wood* into account, even though it was published nearly a year after my own book appeared. In a review of *Many Are the Crimes* that prompted an organized response by several historians of American foreign relations, Sam Tanenhaus cited Weinstein's as yet unpublished book to infer that I had overlooked important evidence of espionage. Sam Tanenhaus, "The Red Scare," *The New York Review of Books*, (January 14, 1999).

[ix] Bruce Craig, "Treasonable Doubt: The Harry Dexter White Case, 1948-1953" (Ph.D. diss., American University, 1999), 588.

[x] Haynes, 92.

---

### **A comment/clarification by Sam Tanenhaus, [Sam2598@aol.com](mailto:Sam2598@aol.com)**

*Posted to H-Diplo on 19 December 2000*

I was forwarded a copy of an essay by Ellen Schrecker in which she refers in a footnote to a review I wrote of her book in *The New York Review of Books*. Your readers should be aware that her reference is confused. My essay did indeed cite Allen Weinstein's *Haunted Wood*, which I had read in galleys, but only to point out that the book offers evidence that Soviet-directed espionage had more or less ended by 1945. I didn't mention it in connection with Ellen's book at all and certainly did not fault her for not drawing on its findings. Her remark about the "organized response" to my review is also misleading. The "response" -- a letter to the editor signed by 19 historians and journalists -- did not mention Ellen's book nor take issue with my analysis of it.

Sam Tanenhaus

---

**Copyright © 2000-2004 by H-Diplo, all rights reserved.** H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo Article Discussion Co-ordinator, George Fujii, [gfuji@umail.ucsb.edu](mailto:gfuji@umail.ucsb.edu).

---