

## **Book Review:**

### **The Cold War At Home, The Red Scare in Pennsylvania, 1945-1960**

by Philip Jenkins

Chapel Hill and London: The University Of North Carolina Press, 1999.

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Based on the revelation of cold war documents from former Soviet archives there has been a growing body of work that seeks to justify the McCarthy period. Philip Jenkins also sees the cold war as the key political factor that lead to attacks on the Communist Party. While his liberal interpretation presents Party members as innocent victims, he never questions the necessity of the cold war. As a result, the Red scare is treated as an understandable political reaction caused by the threat of war. This approach parallels conservative studies that emphasize the same argument, although in a more straightforward anti-Soviet style.

Jenkins' core material provides a detailed examination of anti-Communism in Pennsylvania between the years of 1945 – 1960. The book's focus shows how this movement had widespread influence among a broad spectrum of political actors. As Jenkins states: "In a sense, identifying the whole movement as McCarthyism allowed the campaign to be depoliticized, to be seen not as a social or political movement in which both parties had been involved, but as the criminal ambition of one dubious character and the band of irresponsible adventurers around him." (page 3) Therefor the book takes on Democrats and Republicans alike, as well as tracing the deep involvement of Catholic and Protestant religious activists in the anti-Communist movement. Important chapters in the book cover the anti-Communists purges in industrial unions, amongst schoolteachers, and inside ethnic organizations.

While the scope and strength of the Communist Party is examined in the first chapter, the book's real focus is on those figures leading the Red Scare. Jenkins follows the careers of leading anti-Communists, who comprise an impressive and motley cast of characters. The most important of these are: political opportunist Michael Angelo Musmanno, a Democrat judge who became the most well known public figure of the anti-Communist movement; Republican judge Blair Gunther, who battled the left inside various ethnic organizations; and Harry Sherman, leader of the right-wing in the United Electrical Workers Union. These men combined forces with a set of well-placed judges, district attorneys and political actors to form Americans Battling Communism. Members were leaders of both the Democratic and Republican parties, with direct ties to the Mellon family and Westinghouse. Other important figures in the book are: F.B.I informant Matthew Cvetic, who built a national reputation before falling into disrepute; and Catholic priest Charles Owen Rice, head of the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists.

Pennsylvania was a significant area of concentration and membership for the Communist Party. In the 1940s the Party had over 6,000 members, and had developed influence in the steel and electrical worker's unions, as well as among schoolteachers in Philadelphia. Communists were also active in a wide range of ethnic organizations, the International Workers Order having 39,000 policyholders in western Pennsylvania. The National Negro Congress maintained an

important following, and Communist Party leadership included well-respected organizers such as Steve Nelson, Roy Hudson, Ben Careathers and Andrew Onda.

Communists had built a degree of acceptability through their successful work in mass organizing and their alliance with the New Deal wing of the Democratic Party. The years of anti-fascist solidarity during World War II also created a temporary truce in many mass organizations. But struggles over organizational positions, policies, and ideological influence had always been a part of the political landscape. During the cold war these rivalries flared-up in special ways with the Communist Party providing a convenient domestic enemy. Jenkins shows how this political environment helped previously unconnected left-wing opponents draw together in the anti-Communist movement, coordinating their activities against a backdrop of their own political ambitions and affiliations. But the author fails to appreciate the full scope and history of the struggle for influence and leadership in the unions and ethnic organizations that had been ongoing since the founding of the Communist Party in 1919. The importance of this older rivalry is subordinated to his analysis that the Red scare had its roots in the cold war and the Party's industrial concentrations.

Jenkins argues that: "Concerns about a global war were not unfounded: such an outbreak was a real possibility at several points between, say, 1947 and 1962 hatred of the Communists can only be understood in this fifth-column context: they were viewed as potential enemy agents in the "next war" that might only be days or weeks away." (pages 7-8)

Taking this approach Jenkins comes dangerously close to justifying the anti-Communist hysteria. As he states, "the witches really did exist." (page 12) He goes on to write: "Communists strength was potentially greatest in those areas that would be critical in a future war, and it is difficult to imagine many political systems sufficiently easygoing to tolerate such a network of influence in a military-industrial heartland like western Pennsylvania. It was not simply a matter of groundless Red-baiting." (page 12) Of course Jenkins also criticizes the anti-Communist movement for its violations of civil liberties and political opportunism; nor does he paint Communists as Soviet stooges. But he fails to sufficiently discuss the utter fallacy of a Communist threat to national security by union organizers, school teachers, or ethnic activists. Communist Party trade union policy rarely went beyond New Deal leftism, nor has there ever been any evidence to even suggest a discussion among Communists about industrial sabotage. The only danger to the government was political opposition to the war in Korea and a call for peaceful relations with the Soviets, both well within the democratic framework of American civil liberties. To respect such rights is not as he states, "easygoing," rather it is the definition of democratic tolerance.

The essential character of the anti-Communist movement was to create conservative political hegemony by achieving two main objectives. The first was to end the most radical impulses of the New Deal. The second, to win broad-based consensual support for an American capitalism set for superpower expansion.

This struggle meant using the repressive arm of state legislation and courts, but more importantly it meant winning the hearts and minds of American workers to a conservative social contract.

The cold war created the atmosphere and context to carry this out and in this sense was an

important ideological weapon to create what Jenkins terms “a genuinely comprehensive social movement.” (page 7)

What Jenkins fails to see is the centrality of another “genuinely comprehensive social movement” built during the depression and W.W. II. This movement had its roots in anti-corporate and anti-fascist consciousness among large segments of the American people. Based on these conditions Communists and the left had been surprisingly successful in launching a counter-hegemonic struggle against capitalist domination in civil society. This was a battle over political, cultural and social values in mass organizations such as trade unions, ethnic and civic groups, inside the Democratic Party, and within intellectual circles.

Although Jenkins doesn't present the reader with this analytical framework he certainly reveals the details of how the ideological and cultural struggles swept through Pennsylvania, the details of which give special value to this book. His chapter on the role of the church and religion is particularly strong and lends insight on the religious right of today. Unfortunately he fails to make this connection in the book.

While the heart of Jenkins' work is a solid investigation of anti-Communism in Pennsylvania, his conclusion shows a lack of appreciation for its lasting effects. For Jenkins, by the late 1960s; “The old soldiers of anti-Communism...began to fade away”. (page 197) Although somehow old soldiers like Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan managed to stay around. Furthermore Jenkins contends that; “There was no evidence that the Red Scarce was a veiled rightist putsch, much less a successful counterrevolution against the New Deal.” (page 207) Unions merely became “more centralized...and attuned to the Democratic Party,”(page 208) and as for the Communist Party they would have “collapsed anyway by the 1960's.” (page 209) “In consequence, anti-Communism helped to redefine notions of Americanism, American loyalty, and American citizenship in ways that were less restrictive in terms of class and ethnicity” (page 209) because Jews, Catholics, and ethnic groups gained acceptance with their rejection of Communism.

This argues that as American citizenship and loyalty became politically restricted, somehow freedom and democracy expanded. Such a conclusion would bring comfort to those who see no legitimate place for the left in the American political spectrum. For Jenkins liberalism without radicalism is an acceptable ending. The only real misfortune was the mistreated few. The Truman years are seen as an extension of the New Deal, not its end.

For conservative historians the cold war justifies purging the Red menace. For a liberal like Jenkins it explains the Red scare. In common is the centrality of a cold war analysis that situates attacks on American radicalism in the context of Soviet ambitions, rather than a reactionary retrenchment against progressive politics. Today's lack of political culture and dialogue are results that escape Jenkins. The freeze of the cold war still sets the boundaries of political acceptability.