

Fiske Hall Graduate Paper Award^{*}
**The Communist Party USA in the Post-World War II Era:
A Study in Self-Destruction**

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Introduction

This paper is an examination of the American Communist Party's response to events in the post-World War II era which, for all intents and purposes, ends up being the Party's response to the beginning of the Cold War. The central thesis of this paper is that American Communist Party (CP) destroyed itself by marrying its political fortunes to the policies of the Soviet Union. The Party's uncritical embrace of the Soviet interpretation of world events cost it the hard-earned legitimacy it gained during World War Two. This thesis emerged in the early stage of research and was increasing confirmed by further research and analysis.

The paper begins with a review of CP history in the decade before and during WWII. This section is intended to provide the reader with both a sense of the Party's interpretation of the events preceding the Cold War and a feel for the Party's political and societal status at the end of World War II. This introductory section sets the stage for the discussion of the paper's main topic: how the Party navigated the difficult and treacherous political waters of the emerging ideological, economic, and military contest between East and West for world supremacy. The body of the paper looks at Party's actions during last half of the 1940s. This was a crucial time for the future of the CP. It emerged from WWII in strong position in American society. Soviet and American battlefield cooperation in defeating the Axis left many Americans with a favorable impression of the Party, an impression the Party did much to foster. It was a – if not the – dominant force in a strong US labor movement. The CP could have established its position as independent third party and build on this foundation to extend its influence in US politics. It chose instead to follow a path that led to its marginalization and eventual disappearance from the political arena as anything but a curiosity. This process is detailed in the body of the paper. Lastly, some concluding comments tie the various streams of the paper together.

Background of the Communist Party in the period preceding the post-World War II era

Prior to 1935, the American Communist Party consistently opposed President Franklin Roosevelt's (FDR) New Deal policies. It labeled him a fascist who promoted the interests of capitalists at the expense of the working class. In 1935 the CP executed one of its many dramatic policy shifts to bring it in line with the Soviet stance; the Party began expressing support for the President's policies. FDR's shift to the left was partially responsible this change, but a revision in the Soviet position toward the President played a major role in the CP's about-

* The Fiske Hall Graduate Award is given to the best, non-seminar paper submitted by a graduate student pertaining to history.

face. The Soviet Union began to perceive Adolph Hitler as a potential threat. In response, it embraced the idea of collective security as a bulwark against fascist German and Japanese expansionist designs. Collective security – collaboration between the Soviet Union and the West to contain fascist aggression – by definition necessitated good relations with the United States. Accordingly, the CP committed itself to reversing American isolationist foreign policy in favor of international opposition to fascism.¹

This policy shift purchased increasing acceptability for the CP among leftist and liberal groups in the United States. The Party was so successful in exploiting its new status that by the end of the 1930s it had achieved significant influence in American politics. The CP membership remained relatively small throughout the 1930s, never achieving more than 100,000 members and it continually suffered from a high turnover rate. The number of sympathizers, however, was high during the second half of the decade and a substantial core of devoted followers remained steadfast in its membership.²

During this period the CP experienced significant success in transforming its image from a revolutionary cadre to a party of average citizens with a radical ideology. In fact, the Party abandoned the all-important class struggle in favor of Soviet interests in its attempt to gain support for Soviet policies. The Party went so far as to replace the red flag of revolution with the American flag at its public meetings, and it repudiated the violent tactics that had been so integral to its earlier organizing efforts. In its quest for support of policies favorable to the Soviet Union, the Party even sought an accommodation with the Roman Catholic Church.³

Much of this transformation was accomplished through front organizations dedicated to persuading American citizens and institutions to support policies espoused by the Soviet Union. The CP established front organizations in several key sectors of society. These organizations included the American Youth Congress, the National Negro Congress, and the American League against War and Fascism. While numerically small, CP members were able to dominate or exercise powerful influence in these front organizations through dedication and skillful manipulation. Communists were often able to occupy leadership positions by virtue of their simple willingness to assume responsibility for administration of the organizations.⁴

The American Youth Congress was successful in forging links with prominent political figures, including Eleanor Roosevelt, and to use these connections as an entrée to positions in the Roosevelt administration. In early 1936 the CP organized the National Negro Congress with A. Philip Randolph, president of the powerful Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, as head. By 1937 the American League against War and Fascism claimed two million affiliates. In the same year the League changed its name to American League for Peace and Democracy and dropped any reference to anti-capitalism. It claimed four million affiliates by the time of its fifth congress

¹ Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History (1919-1957)* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 232-235, 321; Joseph R. Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943-1957* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 29.

² Guenter Lewy, *The Cause That Failed: Communism in American Public Life* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 56.

³ Starobin, 37; Howe and Coser, 323, 341.

⁴ Lewy, 25, 30-38; Howe and Coser, 325-356; Starobin, 36-37.

in January 1939 and was graced with a welcoming letter from Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior.⁵

The CP's greatest accomplishments were in the penetration of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). When John L. Lewis broke with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1935 and established the CIO, CP members eagerly served as union organizers. Disciplined and tough CP members exerted an influence in the CIO greatly out of proportion to their actual numbers. By the summer of 1939, the Party was well established in the national CIO office. It controlled or had an influential presence in nearly 40 percent of CIO affiliated unions.⁶

The CP was also successful in achieving support from and influence among intellectuals and the liberal and left-leaning media. The Party started serious recruitment of writers and artists in 1935 with the convening of an American Writers' Congress, sponsored by such notables as Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, and Erskine Caldwell. The Congress soon established the League of American Writers. The League attracted a substantial membership and gained respectability, including the affiliation of or endorsements by prominent individuals such as Earnest Hemingway, James Thurber, and Archibald MacLeish. By 1938 it had over 700 members and President Roosevelt accepted an honorary membership. The Third American Writers' Convention in 1939 was addressed by Thomas Mann. Both the Congress and the League were controlled by the Party's agenda. Besides calling for federal support for artists, these organizations lobbied for embargos on Germany, Japan, and Italy, for revision of the Neutrality Act to allow provision of weapons to the victims of fascist aggression, and for ending the embargo on arms shipments to Republican Spain. The CP and its allies also gained influence in publishing houses and liberal magazines like *The New Republic* and *The Nation*. (The liberal media's turn to the left was informed by more than ideology; popular interest in leftist issues and fiction made this stance profitable.)⁷

The CP's respectability and the success of its popular front activities experienced a decided downturn in August 1939 with the signing of the non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Germany. The abrupt change in Soviet policy left the CP momentarily confused but it soon corrected its course to align with the new Soviet compass. Within a few weeks, the CP rejected collective security in favor of isolationism. It rationalized Soviet treachery by championing the Stalin-Hitler pact as a tactic to limit German expansion, and it blamed the gathering war clouds on England, which it portrayed as an enemy of the working class. The Party voiced opposition to President Roosevelt, the Lend-Lease Program, and conscription. The CP's realignment led to a short-term reversal in its fortunes. Sympathizers deserted it by the thousands and much of the liberal press abandoned its support of the Soviet Union and the CP. Many of its popular front groups disappeared or became shells of their former selves. The American Student Union and the American League for Peace and Democracy, for example, collapsed.⁸

The US government responded by implementing widely popular anticommunist measures. It indicted several CP leaders for passport violations. State governments arrested over

⁵ Lewy, 31-32, 37; Howe and Coser, 348-352.

⁶ Howe and Coser, 368-385; Starobin, 39-40; F. S. O'Brien, "The Communist Dominated Unions in the United States" *Labor History* 9:2 (1968): 185.

⁷ Lewy, 42-48; Howe and Coser, 313-315.

⁸ Howe and Coser, 385-390; Lewy, 61.

350 Party members on a variety of charges. Congress passed the Alien Registration Act, better known as the Smith Act. This law made it a criminal offense to advocate overthrowing the US government or to discuss the desirability of such action.⁹

The CP attempted, with surprising success, to recover by instituting new front organizations to promote its neutralist line. By the summer of 1940 it had created over 300 Emergency Committees for Peace, held peace rallies throughout the nation, and recaptured much of the liberal support it lost the previous year. Luminaries such as Carl Sandburg, Theodore Dreiser, Father Smith of the Society of Catholic Commonwealth, and Rabbi Moses Miller of the Jewish People's Committee lent their names and support to the peace movement. The AFL and CIO were active in promoting peace, with CP controlled or heavily-influenced CIO unions at the forefront.¹⁰

On June 21, 1941 Germany invaded the Soviet Union, and the CP executed another 180° change in direction. Concerned that the West would see Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union as an opportunity to end the worldwide Communist threat through cooperation with Germany, the CP began an all-out campaign in favor of an American declaration of war on the Nazi menace. The Party supported conscription and, ironically, called for a no-strike policy on the part of unions.¹¹

The Party's line met with wide approval based on the public's recognition of the need for a united front in the war against fascism. Between 1941 and 1944 the Party's membership doubled. It made significant inroads into the Democratic Party and captured the American Labor Party in New York State. As the Soviet Union became a popular ally, Communism came to be seen by many as a benign ideology. The popular media started depicting the Soviet system as evolving toward western-style democracy. Even Monsignor Fulton Sheen had good words to say about the Soviet Union's family policies. The CP's success encouraged some members of the Party to envision its integration into US political life.¹²

The CP assumed its role as a war-monger with the same élan it pursued neutrality. It supported universal conscription and many CP members joined the armed forces. Early in 1944, the CP renamed itself the Communist Party Association, ridding itself further of any tint of revolutionary purpose. The Party called for a ban on strikes and supported piece work – a technique previously anathema to CP doctrine – as means to increase war matériels production. The Party went so far as to accuse John L. Lewis of being a member of the fascist fifth column when he called for a miners' strike in 1943. The CP's support for a ban on strikes was visible in its media organs. An April 13, 1945 article in the *Daily Worker* blamed the union officials for failing to take action to end strikes that were interfering with the production of Army tires and planes at several Detroit facilities. The same edition featured a letter from a UAW member who was wounded in the war; he pleaded with the Detroit strikers to return to work. The April 15

⁹ Lewy, 65.

¹⁰ Howe and Coser, 394-395.

¹¹ Howe and Coser, 406-408, 413; Lewy, 61-63.

¹² Lewy, 66-68; Howe and Coser, 424-425.

edition of *The Worker* featured a letter from a miner's wife telling John L. Lewis to accomplish deserved wage increases without resorting to strikes.¹³

As the war's end approached, the Party started promoting post-war cooperation between East and West. Earl Browder, President of the Party, promoted the idea of peaceful coexistence. The West and the Soviet Union had to find a way to live together and the CP started encouraging a policy of peaceful competition as an alternative to the destructive conflict that characterized the pre-war period. The Party's commitment to Roosevelt in the election of 1944 was strengthened by its concern that a Republican Party victory would jeopardize the chances of cooperation. Roosevelt's death was mourned in the CP press when he was memorialized as a champion of freedom. The *Daily Worker* lauded newly sworn-in President Truman as a tireless worker for progress, cited his humble origins, and praised his support for labor.¹⁴

The mainstream interpretation of the Party's ideological shift during World War II sees it as a cynical attempt to promote the interests of the Soviet Union. The CP was concerned with the survival of the USSR, and it sought US entrance into the war and victory over Germany and Japan simply to foster Soviet interests. A more charitable view is taken by Joseph Starobin, a source whose objectivity is subject to question. Starobin was a CP official and served as the editor of the *Daily Worker*. He claims that the Party disengaged from the Soviet Union to a considerable extent during WWII. It recognized that the general commitment to capitalism among all classes in the US made the CP's circumstances unique and that a revolutionary approach to US politics was unworkable. It began to regret its failure to form a working alliance with socialists and other left-wing political forces. The CP hoped to rectify this mistake and to retain its new-found legitimacy. Starobin's position is supported to some extent by Irving Howe and Lewis Coser in their influential study of the Party, *The American Communist Party, A Critical History (1914-1957)*. While generally viewing the CP as an appendage of Moscow, Howe and Lewis do grant some legitimacy to its policy shift during the War. They believe the Party was attempting to remain faithful to Soviet interests during this period at the same it continued integrating into the US political system. The Party recognized that revolutionary change in America was improbable and hoped instead to accomplish its goals through electoral politics.¹⁵

The Communist Party, USA in the post-WWII era

Whether cynical or legitimate, the CP abruptly broke its war-time embrace of the American political system in May 1945. A letter published in France in April by Jacques Duclos, the number two man in the French Communist Party, appeared on May 22 in the New York *World-Telegram*. It was republished in the *Daily Worker* on May 25. Duclos' letter, titled "On the Dissolution of the American Communist Party," was critical of Browder's leadership of the

¹³ Howe and Coser, 408-431; Lewy, 70-73; "New Detroit Strikes Hit Army Tires, Planes," *Daily Worker*, 13 April 1945, p. 5; "UAW Man, Wounded in War, Pleads against Strikes," *Daily Worker*, 15 April 1945, p. 5; "A Miner's Wife Tells Off John L. Lewis," *The Worker*, 15 April 1945, p. 11.

¹⁴ Starobin, 55-56, 72; "Black-Bordered Flags in Moscow for FDR – Builder of U.S.-Soviet Amity," *Daily Worker*, 14 April 1945, p. 3; Earl Browder, "Roosevelt Still Leads America," *Daily Worker*, 14 April 1945, p. 3.

¹⁵ Starobin, 45-46; 57; Howe and Coser, 425.

CP. It claimed that the replacement of the Party with an association deprived the American working class of an independent political voice. Further, Browder's championing of class peace in the US and of international cooperation was a serious misinterpretation of the Teheran Declaration; it transformed a limited diplomatic document into a political platform that was at odds with Marxist doctrine. The letter also praised William Foster, Browder's deputy. Foster had been critical of Browder's abandonment of the CP's revolutionary doctrine. Within a few months, Browder was ousted, never again to regain acceptance in the Party.¹⁶

The purging of Browder coincided with another change in Soviet policy. Cooperation with the West was replaced by expansionism. During the 1920s and 1930s the Soviet leadership was concerned with defending and strengthening its hold on Russia. It adopted the policy of "socialism in one country." The approaching end of WWII presented the Soviet Union with the need to repair its war-torn economy. The Soviet Union also envisioned the possibility of gaining hegemony over Europe. Peaceful coexistence was no longer in its interest. Accordingly, the Soviet leadership repudiated Browder. He was replaced with Foster, a revolutionary hard-liner, and the Party began a new chapter in its convoluted history that would lead to its marginalization in American political life.¹⁷

By 1946 the CP completed its metamorphosis. It depicted the US as well on the road to becoming a fascist state and portrayed any opposition to the Soviet Union as a crime. This change had severe consequences for the CP in its public and private existence. The Party's pro-Soviet line caused it to forsake its hard-won political respectability in a quest for a viable third party, and the Party's internal reaction to government harassment and prosecution led to its evisceration.¹⁸

During WWII the CP political strategy was to work through the American two-party system. It succeeded in gaining a foothold in the Democratic Party and captured the American Labor Party in New York. The post-war Soviet hard line was accompanied by a return to third-party politics. The CP reacted to President Harry Truman's cold-war policies by casting its lot with Henry Wallace and the Progressive Party. Several policy initiatives by Truman fueled this move, including the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. The Soviet Union and by the CP viewed the Marshall Plan as a thinly-veiled attack on Soviet influence in Europe. When Wallace declared in 1946 that he was breaking with Truman's foreign policy toward the Soviet Union, the CP seized the event as an avenue for reentry into third-party politics. The Party shunted aside its disagreements with Wallace over social and economic issues and utilized its hard-won organizing skill to promote Wallace's pro-peace and coexistence stances. The CP saw the

¹⁶ Lewy, 74-75; Howe and Coser, 440-455; David J. Saposs, *Communism in American Politics* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1966), 123; James G. Ryan, *Earl Browder: The Failure of American Communism* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama, The University of Alabama Press, 1997), 246-249.

¹⁷ Howe and Lewis, 440-442; Lewy, 75; Saposs, 123. Here again Starobin's interpretation differs from mainstream analysis. Starobin attributes the ouster of Browder primarily to internal CP politics. He claims that many party regulars were dissatisfied with Browder's accommodation of capitalism, particularly his anti-strike stance, and wished to return to the Party's revolutionary roots. They used the Duclos letter as an opening to replace him with a kindred spirit. Starobin, 83-102.

¹⁸ Howe and Coser, 454-455.

Progressive Party as fertile grounds for recruiting new members. By the time of the July 1948 convention, the CP was essentially in control of the Progressive Party.¹⁹

The CP was realistic enough to realize that Wallace had no chance of winning the election of 1948. It hoped, instead, to wring pro-Soviet concessions on foreign policy from Truman – especially in regard to the Marshall Plan – and to build the foundation for a third party of progressive forces in the US to promote Soviet interests. After failing to convince Wallace to return to the fold, Truman responded by emphasizing his strong anti-Soviet policy and by denouncing Communist infiltration in the Progressive Party. Truman's attacks on Wallace initially proved ineffective, and Wallace gained support for his moderate position on American-Soviet relations. The election of Progressive Party candidate Leo Isacson by a margin of nearly two to one in a closely-watched special congressional race in New York City alarmed the Truman camp. There were optimistic predictions of a ten million vote total for Wallace. The hard-line Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia and alleged suicide of Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk, a leading Czech proponent of democracy, gave Truman the issue he needed to turn aside the Wallace challenge. Public reaction to events in Czechoslovakia was extremely negative. Wallace dismissed the coup as an understandable Russian response to US containment policy. Truman responded by calling on Congress to authorize the Marshall Plan and by defending the need to counter Soviet aggression. He warned liberals and leftist that peace required more than wishful thinking, and said he did not want the support of Wallace and his Communist friends.²⁰

Wallace's positions on foreign policy issues and the accusations that the Progressive Party was controlled by Communists diminished his popularity. Wallace's comment that the Berlin airlift was pointless since the US had already surrendered military control of Berlin to the Russians, coupled with the Progressive Party's unwillingness to condemn aggressive actions of the Soviet Union, turned many of Wallace's supports away. The failure of the Progressive Party to include the so-called "Vermont Resolution" in its platform was particularly harmful to the Wallace campaign. The Resolution simply stated the position that the Progressive Party did not give its blanket support to the foreign policy of any nation. (The CP's successful blocking of this plank was to pay negative dividends in its relations with labor.) In the end, Wallace garnered only a little more than a million votes. The Progressive Party failed to have an impact on US foreign policy and proved to be an inauspicious beginning to the CP's third-party strategy. Rather than being the start of a new progressive political movement that the CP could exploit, the Progressive Party faded into obscurity by the beginning of the next decade. Through its slavish commitment to the Soviet line, the CP traded its influence in the Democratic Party for a failed third-party. Ironically, the CP's support of Wallace can be argued to have strengthened support for the Cold War policies of Truman. Freed from having to coddle Wallace and his supporters, Truman was able parlay his strong anti-Soviet stance into a second term.²¹

¹⁹ Howe and Coser, 460-475; Saposs, 124-125; David Shannon, *The Decline of American Communism: A History of the Communist Party of the United States since 1945* (NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959), 164; Saposs, 180.

²⁰ Howe and Coser, 469; Robert A. Devine, "The Cold War and the Election of 1948" *The Journal of American History* 59:1 (June 1972), 93-98; Harvard Sitkoff, "Harry Truman and the Election of 1948: The Coming of Age of Civil Rights in American Politics," *The Journal of Southern History* 37:4 (November 1971), 608.

²¹ Shannon, 173; Saposs, 178.

Perhaps the Party's greatest setback in the post-WWII era came in the labor movement. In 1946 the CP controlled approximately 40 percent of the membership base of CIO unions. Among important unions the CP held in its grip were the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers, the American Communications Association, and the United Public Workers, which had made significant progress in organizing federal, state and municipal workers. The Party exercised strong influence in the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers concentrated in the Rocky Mountains, and in the West Coast International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union. Given the intensity of labor activities in the last half of the 1940s, the CP should have been well situated to exploit its favorable position in the labor movement.²²

The CP's problems began with the United Auto Workers (UAW). Communists in the UAW generated opposition during the war by their support of a no-strike policy and by their advocacy of incentive pay. Walter Reuther, leading a coalition of non-Communist leftists, challenged the leadership of R. J. Thomas, a Communist sympathizer. Reuther won the presidency of the union in 1946, and in 1947 he took control of the Executive Board. Reuther managed to wrest the UAW from the CP without employing the techniques of red-baiting. Reuther quickly gave notice to Communists and pro-Communists in national and local leadership positions that their services were no longer required. His credentials as an authentic radical allowed him to criticize the Party's influence in unions without being labeled as a dupe of the capitalists.²³

Walter Reuther and UAW were only the beginning of Party's problems. Its widespread loss of influence in labor stemmed from two sources: its support of the Progressive Party and government action to eliminate Communist influence in unions. The Party's support of the Progressive Party substantially weakened its position in the labor movement. American unions not under the strict control of the CP, including many that were friendly to the Party, rejected the call for a third-party movement. In 1947, the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union rejected third-party politics in favor of using labor's influence to reform the Democratic Party. These sentiments were expressed by the New York State CIO at its Labor Day meeting in the same year. At its national convention in Boston in October, the CIO declined to take issue with Truman's foreign policy. It issued a general statement supporting the rehabilitation of war-torn areas in Europe. In January 1948 the American Federation of Labor (AFL) Executive Council endorsed President William Green's public denunciation of Wallace's campaign. Green rejected the Progressive Party because it was dominated by Communists. The CIO followed suit. Both the Executive Board and the CIO-PAC declared that the introduction of a third party into the political arena was unwise. The Executive Board emphasized its position by strengthening its support of Truman's foreign policy; it revised the October 1947 policy statement to express explicit support for the Marshall Plan.²⁴

The fight over Wallace's candidacy in the CIO was a bitter struggle. After a contentious vote in the Executive Board, CP-controlled unions declared their intention to exercise their rights and support Wallace. CIO president, Philip Murray responded with a virulent attack on the

²² Howe and Coser, 457; Starobin, 108, 143-146; O'Brien, 185.

²³ Howe and Coser, 458-259; Saposs, 150; Starobin, 168.

²⁴ O'Brien, 185; Starobin, 166-168; Saposs, 148-149.

Communists and took the unprecedented step of making the Board's vote public. Some CIO union leaders exercised their rights as autonomous entities and defied CIO policy. Others, directly under the supervision of the CIO national office, were not free to act independently. The leaderships of unions that supported Wallace were disciplined for defying official CIO policy. In extreme cases, the CIO set up parallel organizations to sanction dissident organizations. The regional director of Northern California was removed, and when recalcitrant area councils in Los Angeles, New York State, and New York City refused to comply with CIO policy, parallel councils were established. Many prominent unions generally favorable to CP policies declined to support Wallace. These unions, including the United Packinghouse Workers, the United Rubber Workers, and the Marine and Shipbuilders Union, openly announced their support for Truman.²⁵

AFL unions took similar anti-Wallace and anti-CP positions. Particularly harmful to the Party were the vitriolic anti-Wallace positions of the United Hatters, Cap and Millinery Workers and of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Both unions were socialist in orientation and had strong ties to the CP. In fact, because of its ties to the CP, other AFL unions looked to the Garment Workers leadership for guidance on dealing with the Party. The United Hatters and the Garment Workers denounced Wallace's candidacy as promoting the interests of the Party and Moscow over American and European interests, and they decried CP influence in the Progressive Party.²⁶

CP backing of Wallace led to the ouster of many Communists in union leadership positions. In extreme cases, it led to the expulsion or reorganization of CP-dominated unions. This process began shortly after Truman's election in 1948. At the November convention in Portland, Oregon, CIO President Murray made an issue of support for the organization's position on the Marshall Plan. Smaller, strongly Communist unions fought Murray and introduced a resolution congenial to Soviet interests. Many of the influential leftist unions did not side with the Communist position, however. The United Electrical Workers, prominent in support of the Progressive Party, endorsed the Marshall Plan. The International Ladies Garment Workers not only endorsed the Marshall Plan, it voted to revoke the charter of the CP-controlled New York City CIO Council. CIO leadership continued its crusade at the November 1949 convention in Cleveland. By a large majority, delegates amended the CIO constitution to exclude Communists and Communist sympathizers from national office. It expelled the United Electrical Workers and empowered a two-third's majority of the Executive Board to discipline or expell any union committed to achieving CP goals.²⁷

External as well as internal politics played a role in organized labor's attack on the CP. Some of the CIO animus toward CP-dominated unions can be attributed to a fear of guilt by association. A number of influential CIO officials opposed Communist ideology and perceived the movement's association with the Party as potentially harmful. These officials believed that stances taken by CP-dominated unions on issues such as the Marshall Plan, the Greek civil war,

²⁵ Saposs; 149-151.

²⁶ Saposs, 151-53.

²⁷ Shannon, 215-216; O'Brien, 186-187; Howe and Coser, 467; Ryan, 266.

and the Berlin airlift would paint the CIO with a pink brush of association. Hence, they were anxious to distance the CIO from unpopular CP positions.²⁸

Government action during this period compounded CP union problems. Section 9h of the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 required all local and national union officials to sign an affidavit certifying that they were not members of the Party or affiliated with the Party or any organization that advocated the overthrow of the US government through non-constitutional means. Failure to execute the affidavits rendered unions ineligible for the services of the National Labor Relations Board. At first nearly all unions resisted the affidavit requirement. The practice of membership raiding, however, made the Board's services a necessity for most unions. If a union's officials did not submit the affidavits, the union could not request a jurisdictional hearing in the event another union was attempting to organize its membership at a worksite. Powerful unions such as the United Mine Workers could ignore the requirement, but not so weaker unions. By the end of the decade most unions complied with the 9h requirements. CP-controlled unions that did not comply were subject to unbridled raiding. The affected unions lost members or faded out of existence. In the unions that survived, the Party's stance on the affidavit requirement alienated union leaderships.²⁹

By 1950 the CIO had expelled nine CP-controlled unions and the Party's influence in the American labor movement was in an inexorable downward spiral. At the end of WWII, the CP dominated unions with a combined membership in excess of two million. By the mid-1950s, when the full effects of its policies with regard to federal law and support of the Progressive Party had registered, membership was reduced to less than 200,000. The CP's inability to free itself from strict adherence to the Soviet line cost it the leadership of a large segment of the organized working class – a group that should have provided its natural constituency.³⁰

Several events during the years immediately following WWII caused the American public and political leadership to begin questioning the possibility of peace with the Soviet Union. In February 1946 Stalin described WWII as part of a continuing struggle between capitalism and Communism that would eventually lead to the West's downfall. Stalin backed his words with action. In 1947, the Soviet Union ignored its pledge to conduct free election and installed Communist dictatorships in virtually all of Eastern Europe. In February 1948, a coup was engineered in Czechoslovakia that replaced the coalition government with a Communist regime. Strong showing by Communist parties in France and Italy alarmed the American public. In 1948, the Soviets began the Berlin blockade. The next year did nothing to assuage American fears. In September 1949 the Soviet Union exploded an atomic bomb and China "fell" to the Communists in October. During this same period, revelations of Soviet espionage stunned Americans. In 1946 the Canadian government arrested twenty-two individuals for passing secrets to the Soviets, and the British governments convicted Alan May for providing information to the Soviet Union about the atom bomb. In 1948 Americans witnessed the conviction of Alger Hiss for perjury in a spy case that gripped the nation's attention. Klaus Fuchs, a former physicist on

²⁸ O'Brien, 204-205; Shannon, 215-216; Starobin, 201-202.

²⁹ O'Brien, 188-190; Howe and Coser, 466-468.

³⁰ Howe and Coser, 468-469; Shannon, 217-218; Penina Migdal Glazer, "From the Old Left to the New: Radical Criticism in the 1940s." *American Quarterly* 24:5 (December 1972): 588.

the Manhattan Project confessed in February 1950 to being a spy for the Soviet Union since the early 1940s. In July 1948, Julius Rosenberg was arrested for conspiracy to commit espionage. To further curdle the milk, North Korea invaded South Korea in June 1950.³¹

Thus, by 1948 it was apparent, even to many of its ardent supporters, that the Soviet Union shared responsibility for Cold War tensions. This was not a perspective shared by the Party. Instead of taking a balanced position on the Cold War and criticizing both US and Soviet actions, the CP responded by characterizing Soviet actions as a defensive reaction to Western aggression. The Party embarked on a peace campaign intended to alter US policy in a way that favored Soviet interests. The United States was portrayed as a war-mongering, imperialist state pushing the world to the brink of nuclear war. Capitalism was identified as the root cause of US actions. The Korean War, for example, was portrayed as a Wall Street backed plot to enslave all East Asia and bring down the Communist governments in China and the Soviet Union. The Party used its media outlets to wage the peace campaign. *In Fact*, a weekly journal dedicated to revealing anti-Soviet bias in the American press and with a subscription of 176,000 in 1947, published articles in 1949 heralding economic progress in Eastern Europe and condemning the Atlantic Pact. *In Fact* claimed that Soviet economic policies were leading to an integrated European economy that would end the threat of war. It contrasted them to the Marshall Plan which was inflaming tension. It depicted the Atlantic Pact as a renewed attack on the Soviet Union that was intended to encircle it with fascist governments. The Atlantic Pact was soon to be followed by a Pacific pact that would complete the isolation of the Soviet Union. A later article claimed that the Atlantic Pact was a ploy to rearm Germany in preparation for the next world war. *In Fact* asserted that 8,000,000 American jobs would be lost because of US Cold War policies, and it stated that the Marshall Plan started the Cold War by creating two separate worlds. It further claimed that the Eastern European Soviet Block countries were recovering faster than those of the West.³²

The Party's magazine for intellectuals, *Masses and Mainstream*, took the same approach. An article in the May 1948 issue claimed that the US was preparing the German Army for use in the next world war, that the Marshall Plan was the keystone of a plan to crush socialism, and that the Soviet zone in Eastern Europe was undergoing a democratic revolution resulting in demilitarization. An article in a September issue explained that the Communist Party supported the Progressive Party because it represented the interests of the American People, promoted class consciousness, and sought to avoid another fascist war.³³

³¹ Lewy, 76-78; Starobin, 191-192; Shannon, 203, 206, 218, 225.

³² Starobin, 192; Shannon, 203-204; "Soviet Answer to Marshall Plan is Integrated Economy, Treaties to End New Wars, Trade Rivalries," *In Fact* 18:16 (1948): 1; "Atlantic Pact," *In Fact* 19:3 (1949): 1; "Cold War Freezes Cost West Trade: Over 8,000,000 US Jobs to Be Lost," *In Fact* 19:18 (1949): 1-3. A good example of the convoluted political interpretations that emerged in the early Cold War is provided by a 1951 article in a liberal Anti-Communist journal. It claimed that Communists were gaining ascendancy in Japan and that Japan's rearmament could lead to its cooperation with the Soviets and the Chinese Communists in establishing Communist hegemony over all of Asia. A map illustrated potential Communist control in an arc from India to Japan. Richard L-G Deverall, "Are We Rebuilding Tojo's Red Army," *The New Leader* 34:3 (January 1951), 4.

³³ Gerhart Eister, "Whose Germany?" *Masses and Mainstream* 1:3 (May 1948): 50-57; Adam Lopes, "The Challenge of the New Party," *Masses and Mainstream* 1:7 (September 1948): 31.

World events and the CP's reaction to them severely damaged the Party's standing with the American public. From mid-1946 to early 1948 the percent of American people who believed that CP members were loyal to the Soviet Union rather than the US increased from 48 to 65 percent and over 60 percent felt the CP should be outlawed. By the start of the 1950s, two assumptions were firmly rooted in the American psyche: the CP was a real and immediate threat to US security and the way to meet this threat was to suppress the Party. The Party's lockstep parroting of the Soviet line aborted the burgeoning acceptability it gained during WWII.³⁴

Throughout the late 1940s the federal government was increasingly concerned with the threat posed by the CP. In February 1946, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) began tracking CP members and sympathizers and, with the tacit approval of the Justice Department, developed a detention plan to round up and incarcerate them in the event of a national emergency. On July 20, 1948 the Justice Department secured an indictment from a New York City Grand Jury of twelve members of the CP's National Board. They were indicted under Title I of the Alien Registration Act. The defendants, including CP President Foster, were charged with conspiring to teach the doctrine of overthrowing the government. One proof of the conspiracy was the dissolution of the Communist Political Association and resurrection of the Communist Party of the United States. (Foster's case was severed due to his failing health; he was never brought to trial on these charges.) The trial began in January 1949 and ended in October with a guilty conviction. All eleven defendants were fined \$10,000 and ten were sentenced to five years in prison. The sentence of one, Robert Thompson, was reduced to three years based on his war record. The convictions were upheld on appeal in 1950 and confirmed by the Supreme Court in 1951. The Supreme Court upheld the Smith Act in its decision. The government took action on other fronts as well. In 1947 President Truman, in part to short-circuit a right-wing push for repressive legislation, issued Executive Order 65, creating the government loyalty program. The same year the Justice Department began deporting alien Communists.³⁵

In an all too familiar pattern, the CP's response to the trial had the effect of alienating potential support. Instead of focusing on the civil liberties implications of their prosecution and attracting the support of liberal elements, the Party attempted to put the US government on trial. An attack on the American government rather than freedom of speech under the First Amendment formed the basis of the Party's defense. The defense team's disruptive courtroom antics alienated potential support, and the Party had a difficult time raising defense funds. The Civil Rights Congress, a front group established to raise money, collected only \$74,000 of its \$250,000 goal. The Party squandered the opportunity to rally broad support around the principle of freedom of expression. The twelve men were not charged with advocating the overthrow of the government but with conspiring to teach a doctrine that called for its necessity, a distinction that could have elicited the support of some elements of the intellectual community. Instead of gaining sympathy, the defendants' strategy generated apathy at best and condemnation and suspicion at worst.³⁶

³⁴ Lewy, 78-79; Migdal, 589; Robert Griffith, "The Political Context of McCarthyism," *Review of Politics* 33:1, 33.

³⁵ Athan Theoharis, "The Truman Administration and the Decline of Civil Liberties: The FBI's Success in Securing Authorization for a Preventive Detention Program," *The Journal of American History* 64:4 (March 1978): 1016; Shannon, 196-200; Starobin, 196; Lewy, 80.

³⁶ Shannon, 198-199; Starobin, 196.

The CP responded to the Smith Act trials of its leadership – especially the revelation that it was infiltrated by FBI agents - and other government repressive actions in two fundamental ways: part of its remaining leadership went underground and, most important, it turned on itself. Early in 1949 the CP stopped maintaining centralized lists of its members and it stopped issuing membership cards. The basic building block of the Party structure, the club, was trimmed from a membership of twenty-five to no more than five. Written documents were destroyed and the creation of new records was held to a minimum. The reduction in club size had a demoralizing effect on party stalwarts; they might have been less of a security risk, but at the time the Party faithful needed intellectual and psychological support to withstand government repression and public opprobrium, they were isolated from kindred spirits. To ensure commitment and ideological purity, the CP purged hundreds of members. Thousands of other members used the Party's internal security program as an excuse to free themselves from their allegiance to an unpopular cause. In a strange episode in the CP's history, many individuals were forced out as the result of a "white chauvinist" campaign in which Party faithful who demonstrated insufficient sensitivity and commitment to blacks were expelled.³⁷

The Party sent scores of its leadership into an underground existence. These individuals changed locations and identities to thwart FBI infiltration and to lay the foundation for a clandestine organization should the Party be outlawed. This underground cadre led a difficult life; they were cut off from the sustenance of Party fellowship and isolated from the masses they were supposed to be organizing. This maneuver also served to give credence to charges of conspiracy against the Party. The CP acted like the organization its accusers claimed it was.³⁸

As with its post-WWII foray into third-party politics, its battles with the CIO and AFL leaderships, and its unqualified support of Soviet Cold War policies, the Party's internal response to prosecution and persecution weakened its position in American society. The CP lost thousands of members, either through expulsion or voluntary exit, and alienated sympathizers by acting the role the government and public had assigned to it. Like the accused, who by his or her furtive actions, nervously plays the part of a guilty person, the Party's practices gave substance to the charge it was a clandestine organization committed to the interests of an enemy of the United States.

Conclusion

The Party squandered the legitimacy it earned during WWII by its misguided devotion to a regime that it should have seen as standing in sharp contrast to its ideals, regardless of CP's criticisms of the United States. The Party sacrificed the inroads it made into the Democratic Party by supporting the Wallace campaign. To compound its error, the CP manipulated the Progressive Party into taking a stance on Soviet Cold War aggression that precluded any chance Wallace had of making a strong showing in the 1948 election. The opportunity to persuade the American public that it takes two to make a fight and that a thoughtful approach to Soviet aggression might diminish tensions, was forfeited in a blind rationalization of any and every

³⁷ Starobin, 197-198; Shannon, 228-230; Ryan, 266

³⁸ Shannon, 230-232; Ryan, 266.

Soviet action, despite the obvious aggressive intent of many of them. The Party alienated its friends in the intellectual community and the liberal media, isolating itself from support that might have served as an ally in the fight against suppression in the McCarthy era of the early 1950s.

The Party likewise dissipated its influence in the labor movement, a movement it had done much to create and bring in to the center of political power in the United States. The CP estranged the group that should have been the wellspring of its existence. The Party's ideology was based on promoting the interests of the working class. Unions, composed of the proletariat, should have provided the muscle that the Party, as its vanguard, employed to wedge open American politics to workers' interests. Instead, the Party forced the CIO and, to a lesser extent, the AFL to choose between the CP's myopic devotion to Soviet policy and their organizational wellbeing and the loyalty of the membership to the US.

In the crowning act of self-destruction, the CP turned on itself. At a time when the Party needed all the support it could muster, it drove off its own members as well as sympathizers. The Party's action gave substance to the charges against it. Supporting the Party came to be seen not as supporting fundamental constitutional guarantees, but as aiding an instrument of a foreign government bent on destroying those very guarantees. A pre-planned funeral for the Communist Party, USA as it entered its death throes in 1950s might have well included the following epitaph, "In seeking the seeds of your demise, look no further than the closest mirror."