Revising the revisionists on American Communism

On The Secret World of American Communism, the inaugural volume of the Annals of Communism series from Yale University Press.

With the publication of The Secret World of American Communism—the initial volume in a new series of studies called “Annals of Communism,” published by the Yale University Press under the editorship of Jonathan Brent—the history of the Communist movement in America has been definitively altered. This book is the first to give us an account of clandestine Communist activities in this country that is based on documents from the recently opened archives of the former Soviet Union. It is the work of two distinguished American scholars—Harvey Klehr of Emory University and John Earl Haynes of the Library of Congress—and a Russian archivist, Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov, who was formerly with the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Recent History in Moscow.

What this book establishes beyond the shadow of a doubt is that the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) was, from the outset of its creation in the aftermath of the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia in 1917, an organization whose sole purpose was to serve the interests of the Soviet state by any means and for whatever ends—legal or illegal, public or secret—determined by the Party’s masters in Moscow. It also establishes that the operations of the CPUSA were financed by sizable infusions of money secretly and often illegally channeled to the Party from the Soviet Union. It thus marks finis to whatever claims may have been advanced in the past—and there have been many, of course, and recently, too—that the CPUSA was somehow to be understood as a normal and independent American political party, notwithstanding its radical views.

The authors of The Secret World of American Communism write with admirable clarity about the issues their work has been obliged to engage:

Many questions remain about the CPUSA’s role in American political and social life. One of the most contentious and important issues concerns the party’s clandestine activities. Did the Communist party conceal key aspects of its organization in a secret apparatus? Did secret members of the party infiltrate government agencies in the 1930s and 1940s?
Did the Communist party and its members commit espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union? Strictly speaking, only the last was a crime. The maintenance of a concealed underground organization, however, marked the CPUSA as an abnormal participant in democratic politics. And the manipulation of government agencies to promote Communist policies was a form of political subversion.

They write with clarity and candor, too, about the historiographic debate their study is designed to address:

Two views of the history of the CPUSA are in contention. The older view, first developed in the 1950s, holds that the CPUSA was never an independent American political party but a creature given life and meaning by its umbilical ties to the Soviet Union. Seeing the Soviet connections as the defining aspect of American communism, these scholars … focus on the party’s willingness to alter its policies to suit Soviet needs and on the key roles played by the party leadership in defining the Stalinist nature of American communism.

The revisionist view, the dominant perspective among academic historians for the past twenty years, holds that the American Communist movement was a normal, albeit radical, political participant in American democracy. This assessment sees American communism as a domestic American movement with its roots in America’s democratic, populist, and revolutionary past.

About the conclusions which the authors of The Secret World of American Communism have reached on the basis of their research in the Comintern archives, they are appropriately unambiguous:

It is no longer possible to maintain that the Soviet Union did not fund the American party, that the CPUSA did not maintain a covert apparatus, and that the key leaders and cadres were innocent of connection with Soviet espionage operations …. Both the Soviet Union and the American Communist leadership regarded these activities as normal and proper. Their only concern was that they not become public.

In other words, what the authors correctly characterize as the dominant perspective among academic historians for the past twenty years on the Communist movement in America has proved to be an ideological fantasy. The bulk of the research that is documented in The Secret World of American Communism fully supports this claim with an extraordinary range of dramatic revelations.

Document 1, for example, is a Comintern accounting sheet listing payments to Americans in 1919 and 1920 amounting to the equivalent of almost three million dollars, an immense fortune at the time, with more than a million of it going to John Reed, the author of Ten Days That Shook the World.

Documents 2, 3, and 4, from the years 1923–25, are concerned with the activities of Armand Hammer and his father, Julius, both American physicians and businessmen resident in Moscow at the time. (Armand Hammer was later well known in the United States as the head of Occidental Petroleum and an art collector on a big scale.) The authors write that Comintern records establish
for the first time that in the early years of the Soviet regime, Armand and his father were actually an official part of the Comintern’s covert financial network, and, further, that Documents 3 and 4 disclose for the first time that both Julius and Armand Hammer were laundering Soviet money—that is, providing a channel for Comintern funds to be paid to Communist operatives abroad.

The documentation detailing the Moscow-directed activities of the CPUSA in the 1930s and 1940s is even more plentiful. There is much in The Secret World, for example, about J. Peters, who was identified by Whittaker Chambers as heading the CPUSA’s underground organization in the 1930s. The documents assembled in this book confirm, as the authors write, that Chambers’s allegations concerning J. Peters and the Communist underground in Washington, D.C., in the 1930s were true.

Then, too, there is a good deal about the curious links that formed what was, in effect, a Communist underground, more or less supervised by the NKVD in Moscow and the CPUSA in New York, that spread from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War to the Office of Strategic Services and the Office of War Information in Washington during the Second World War. This chilling story, all of it meticulously documented in The Secret World, is another of the extraordinary revelations to be found in this important study.

Whether, in today’s intellectual climate, these and the other disclosures contained in The Secret World of American Communism will prove to be sufficient to reverse the dominant perspective among academic historians for the past twenty years on the subject of the Communist movement in America remains to be seen. For this dominant perspective has been based more on ideology than on an interest in knowing the truth. But for anyone interested in the truth, this first volume in Yale’s Annals of Communism series marks the beginning of a triumphant revision of the revisionists.