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WHO ARE THE CHILDS BROTHERS?

By David J. Garrow, Professor, The Graduate School and University Center, City University of New York.

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For almost a decade historians and journalists have known only a small, small part of post-World War II America's most intriguing spy story: how from the early 1950s through the early 1980s the FBI's two most prized secret informants were a pair of aging Communist party international travelers, Jack and Morris Childs. The Childs brothers' story is both fascinating and convoluted. Personally acquainted with a wide range of world figures, ranging from Fidel Castro to Mao Tse-Tung, the brothers--spoken of as Solo within the U.S. intelligence community--played significant roles in multiple arenas: questioning Castro about Lee Harvey Oswald and the Kennedy assassination; and telling the FBI that Stanley D. Levison, a New York attorney who later would become one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s principal advisers, was a central figure in the subterranean financial structure of the Communist party (CP).

While some officials in the CIA theorized that the brothers were likely to be Soviet triple agents rather than American double agents, the Childs brothers profited handsomely from the FBI's largess; bureau executives worried about financial questions while wondering whether the project was unintentionally helping sustain the CP rather than combat it. Most important, however, the Childs brothers served as a very direct, one-way transmission belt between the two people in America most committed to believing in the CP's influence and significance: the Communist party chief Gus Hall and the FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. Thus the exaggerated private boasts of the former became eagerly welcomed fodder for the latter, top-secret evidence that the Communist party was just as powerful an evil force as ever had been suspected. The FBI's ongoing post 1956 fixation with the CP was perhaps more a product of the Childs brothers than anything else.

The bare bones of this story are known, but the copious, classified documentary record that details it remains wholly untouched and probably will continue to be for decades to come. If the Freedom of Information Act did not provide executive-branch agencies the discretion to withhold historically significant documents even twenty-five or thirty years after the events in question, the Solo story and its attendant mysteries--like others dependent on federal documents for a full telling-- would emerge into public view in the 1990s rather than be delayed until well into the twenty-first century, at best.