

# BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY OF THE AMERICAN LEFT

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**CHARNEY, GEORGE BLAKE (1905–1975).** George Blake Charney was for two decades a leading Communist functionary. He was born in Ekaterinoslav, Russia, in February 1905 to Jewish parents who immigrated to the United States the following year. The family settled in Brooklyn, where the elder Charney operated first a grocery store and then a clothing store. Charney graduated from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania in 1927, did one year of graduate work in economics at Harvard, and received a law degree from New York University in 1931. He joined the Communist Party in 1933. Two years later he abandoned his legal career to become a full-time Party functionary, one of many younger, American-raised Communists moving into responsible positions as the Party broke out of its isolation.

Charney's first assignment was organizational secretary of the New England district. Early in 1937 he was appointed organizational secretary in Harlem, in which post he played a key role in the Party's relationship with the American Labor Party and Congressman Vito Marcantonio (q.v.). In mid-1940 he was assigned to the New York State office of the Communist Party. After his discharge from the army in 1945, Charney became county organizer in Manhattan and a member of the New York State secretariat, one of those responsible for shaping the policies that helped isolate the Party in the late 1940s.

Charney was arrested for violating the Smith Act in 1951. Anxious to broaden the defense strategy and avoid the issue of revolution, he came into conflict with William Foster (q.v.). Convicted and sentenced to two years in prison, Charney was freed after a key witness, Harvey Matusow, admitted committing perjury. He was retried and convicted, but this decision was overturned in higher court in 1958. Charney was elected chairman of the New York Party in 1956 and also put on the National Board. Identified with the reformers around John Gates (q.v.), who hoped to democratize the Party and wean it from its close Russian ties, Charney was gradually isolated as their supporters left the Party in the wake of revelations about Stalin's crimes. He stepped down from his New York post in 1957 and resigned from the Communist Party in May 1958. Charney worked in the printing industry after his resignation. He died on December 13, 1975. SOURCE: George B. Charney, *A Long Journey* (1968).

HARVEY KLEHR

**CHILDS, MORRIS (b. 1902).** Morris Childs was a longtime top functionary of the American Communist Party whose intimate knowledge of its secret work and close acquaintance with Soviet leaders made him the FBI's most valuable Communist informant ever following his secret 1952 recruitment. Born Morris Chilofsky to Jewish parents near Kiev, Russia, on June 10, 1902, he immigrated to the United States along with his three younger brothers when all were children. He became a naturalized U.S. citizen on October 18, 1927, in Chicago, where he worked as a draftsman and milk-truck driver. Before the end of the decade he had emerged as one of the Chicago Party's most promising young cadres.

Early in the 1930s Childs was sent to the Lenin School in Moscow, where he distinguished himself as a loyal supporter of Soviet preferences during factional strife. Upon his return to the United States, Childs was named district organizer in Milwaukee, and in 1935 he was promoted to Chicago district organizer and Illinois Party state secretary. In 1938 Childs was elected to the National Committee, and in 1945 he moved to New York to take over the Party's political action work. The following year he was named editor of the *Daily Worker*, and he held that post until June 27, 1947, when he was forced to step aside as a sacrificial offering by Eugene Dennis' (q.v.) majority faction to assuage complaints from the hard-line minority led by William Z. Foster (q.v.).

Childs was astounded and infuriated by his removal, and along with younger brother Jack, a longtime Communist operative, he quietly drifted away from the Party. Approached in the spring of 1952 by the FBI as part of a standing program to attempt recruitment of disaffected members, both the Childs brothers agreed to become FBI informants and to reactivate themselves within the secret world of the Party's shadowy financial operations. By the mid-1950s the two men had become central links in the chain by which Soviet financial support was furnished to the American Communist Party, and Morris regularly traveled to the Soviet Union and other Communist bloc countries, earning a private nickname as "the Ambassador" among the top inner circle of the American Party. Childs' international jaunts included a Spring 1964 visit with Cuba's Fidel Castro, undertaken at the FBI's behest so as to explore secretly possible Cuban sponsorship of Lee Harvey Oswald, assassin of President John F. Kennedy.

Married three times, the father of one son, and a longtime resident of Skokie, Illinois, Childs outlived his younger brother and compatriot Jack, who died in 1980, a year before their informant work (which the FBI spoke of by the code name "Solo") was exposed publicly.

SOURCE: David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From "Solo" to Memphis* (1981).

DAVID J. GARROW

**CLAESSENS, AUGUST (1885–1954).** August Claessens was a Socialist member of the New York State Assembly and a speaker, writer, organizer, and administrator for the New York City Socialist Party. Born in 1885 in Berne, Switzerland, Claessens migrated to New York during childhood. He was educated in the Roman Catholic parochial schools of that city and worked as a newsboy while going to grammar school. In the period between 1900 and 1910, Claessens worked as a housepainter, grocery clerk, shipping clerk, and performed professionally as an elocutionist and pantomimist.

An interest in furthering his theatrical career led Claessens to study elocution at Cooper Union on the Lower East Side of New York City. His studies at Cooper Union led him to further his education at the Rand School, a major Socialist institution. While at the Rand School, Claessens became interested in socialism and the Yiddish language. Within two years—by 1909—he became