

Newsday (New York)
April 20, 1995, Thursday

American Communists in the Kremlin's Pocket

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PART II; Pgs. B6, B8.

LENGTH: 848 words

THE SECRET WORLD OF AMERICAN COMMUNISM, by Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes and Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov. Yale University Press, 348 pp., \$ 25.

DRAWING UPON long-secret and newly opened Moscow archives that document clandestine Soviet-American linkages from the beginning of American communism in 1919 through the end of World War II, this wonderfully rich and revelatory book promises to revolutionize historians' understanding of the American Communist Party (CPUSA) during those decades when it did play a consequential role in American politics.

Moribund ever since mid-1950s revelations of Stalinist mass murders in the Soviet Union and nowadays almost defunct, the American Communist Party was once - especially in the years between 1935 and 1945 - a significant presence in the United States. Boasting almost 100,000 members in 1939, the CPUSA represented an ideologically respectable force that had not yet emerged as the target of intensive governmental and popular antipathy it became in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

"The Secret World of American Communism" is a memorable, powerful book. It reprints documents drawn from the Moscow files of the Comintern - the Communist International, the Soviet Union's worldwide political arm - and from sensitive files that the CPUSA shipped to Moscow for safekeeping.

The Moscow documents show that Soviet financial subsidies to American Communists began as early as 1919 - virtually simultaneous with the party's founding in this country - and demonstrate again and again how the CPUSA of the 1930s and '40s created an elaborate "secret apparatus" to assist the Soviet regime in "special work" that included political penetration of U.S. government agencies.

The documents conclusively demonstrate that well-known American businessman Armand Hammer and his father, Julius, both played an active and official role in "laundering Soviet money" for the CPUSA, and likewise show how confidential U.S. communications - such as an October, 1936, letter from the U.S. ambassador in Berlin to President Franklin D. Roosevelt - quickly made their way from the State Department into the hands of American Communists - and thence to Moscow.

"The Secret World" uncovers a significant number of historical nuggets: how CPUSA leader Earl Browder used Soviet intelligence agents in the United States for his own clandestine communications to Moscow, and how American Gen. (Wild Bill) Donovan, head of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the organizational predecessor to the Central Intelligence Agency,

lied repeatedly to the U.S. Congress about OSS' intimate dealings with the CPUSA when the United States and the Soviet Union were allied in the fight against Hitler's Germany.

The book's documents are not without their lighter moments. One American Communist agent, clandestinely posted to Manila, pursued his enthusiasm for therapeutic enemas by setting up a "colonic irrigation dispensary" as his business "cover." In another instance, an illegal FBI burglary of a CPUSA functionary's home turned up files that the party itself had stolen from a former member's house and abstracted for Moscow. The FBI report detailing its burglary was pilfered by a Soviet agent working in the Justice Department, Judith Coplon, who in turn was arrested as she tried to deliver the document to her Russian contact.

But most of what "The Secret World" details is deadly serious, including CPUSA involvement in the execution, in Spain, of some American leftists who volunteered to fight for the Communist-backed Republicans in the Spanish Civil War and then sought to leave. The book further documents how one of the CPUSA's secret operations, the "Brother-Son" network, was utilized by Soviet intelligence agents who had penetrated America's nuclear weapons program.

Thus the book's authors - Klehr is chair of political science at Atlanta's Emory University, Haynes is a scholar at the Library of Congress and Firsov is a Comintern specialist in Moscow - understandably conclude that "it is now no longer possible to maintain that the Soviet Union did not fund the American party, that the CPUSA did not maintain a cover apparatus, and that key leaders and cadres were innocent of connection with Soviet espionage operations." Indeed, there is now no denying that the CPUSA was in part - just as its opponents have long alleged - "a conspiracy financed by a hostile foreign power that recruited members for clandestine work, developed an elaborate underground apparatus, and used that apparatus to collaborate with espionage services of that power."

"THE SECRET WORLD" is one of this year's most significant books about 20th-Century American political history. But many other equally explosive old documents still remain secret, both in the unopened KGB archives in Moscow and in FBI files in Washington. Indeed, one of the greatest ironies created by the collapse of the USSR is that American historians now have wider access to once-secret Soviet files than we do to similar materials generated by our own FBI and CIA.