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Whitewashing Reds

IN DENIAL:

Historians, Communism and Espionage.

By John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr. Encounter. 316 pp. \$25.95

Reviewed by David J. Garrow

In three impressive scholarly books published during the past decade, John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr detailed how intimately the American Communist Party was tied to the Kremlin from the birth of the party in 1919 right up to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991: *The Secret World of American Communism*, written with Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov (1995); *The Soviet World of American Communism*, written with Kyrill M. Anderson (1998); and *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (1999). Using newly available Soviet files and decoded American intercepts of Soviet cable traffic, the authors revealed that dozens of American Communists, including Alger Hiss and Julius Rosenberg, were guilty beyond any reasonable doubt of aiding Soviet espionage against the United States.

Newspapers and magazines paid widespread attention to these revelations, but in scholarly circles, the reaction was often grudging and sometimes hostile. Now Haynes, a historian at the Library of Congress, and Klehr, a professor of politics and history

at Emory University, have written an energetic and outspoken rejoinder to their critics.

In Denial pulls no punches. "Far too much academic writing about communism, anti-communism and espionage is marked by dishonesty, evasion, special pleading and moral squalor. Like Holocaust deniers, some historians of American communism have evaded and avoided facing a preeminent evil"—namely, the Stalinist dictatorship that for decades ruled the Soviet Union, murdered millions of its own citizens, and treated foreign Communist parties



Alger Hiss testifying before a federal grand jury in 1948.

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as mere minions of Moscow.

There's no denying Haynes and Klehr's contention that "a significant number of American academics still have soft spots in their hearts for the CPUSA," the American Communist Party. The history of American communism has been a highly active and productive field for three decades now, in significant part because many scholars who are themselves veterans of the New Left of the 1960s and early 1970s have been, in Haynes and Klehr's words, "searching for a past that would justify their radical commitments and offer lessons for continuing the struggle."

The Communist Party was a significant presence in American politics from the mid-1930s until the late 1940s, with a peak membership approaching 100,000, but it was in decline and on the defensive by 1950 as a result of the onset of the Cold War and the federal prosecution of party leaders for conspiring to advocate the overthrow of the government. After Nikita Khrushchev acknowledged some of Joseph Stalin's crimes against humanity in 1956, the American party shrank further, to just 3,000 members by 1958. It still exists today, though its last notable pronouncement was an endorsement of the unsuccessful coup Soviet hard-liners mounted against Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991, just before the final collapse of the Soviet Union.

Haynes and Klehr quip that "never have so many written so much about so few," but the crucial question about the historiography of American Communists is whether scholars bring a sufficiently critical and open-minded attitude to their work. *In Denial* denounces much of that scholarship as "bad history in the service of bad politics" and a stark illustration of how "an alienated and politicized academic culture misunderstands and distorts America's past." Thanks to American historians' "unbalanced tilt to the left," Haynes and Klehr complain, "the nostalgic afterlife of communism in the United States has outlived most of the real Communist regimes around the world."

The most powerful aspect of Haynes and Klehr's earlier work concerns Project Venona, the American effort to decipher Soviet intelligence cables from the mid-1940s, which were subject to encryption errors that the Soviets later corrected. In general, as

Haynes and Klehr recount here, the intercepts demonstrated that "the American Communist Party closely cooperated with Soviet spies and intelligence officers." More specifically, the Venona messages resolved historical debates over the guilt of many suspected spies, including both well-known names and less heralded figures who had wielded significant influence in the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt. "The evidence of the cooperation of Alger Hiss, Julius Rosenberg, Lauchlin Currie, and Harry Dexter White with Soviet espionage is not ambiguous," Haynes and Klehr write, "it is convincing and substantial."

Yet numerous scholarly publications ignore the Venona evidence or deny its importance. Perhaps the most egregious example Haynes and Klehr cite is a 1999 entry in the *American National Biography*, a highly regarded reference work that is available in many libraries. The editors assigned the profile of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg to Norman Markowitz, a Rutgers University historian and, as Haynes and Klehr note, "a member of the CPUSA who even edits its theoretical/ideological journal, *Political Affairs*." Given the affiliations of their chosen author, the *American National Biography* editors might have reviewed the contribution with a careful and critical eye, but the published result shows they didn't: Markowitz simply dismisses the Venona documents as "discredited." Haynes and Klehr write that Markowitz's "deceptive" profile will "distort the historical understanding of students for several generations to come."

Haynes and Klehr find similar and more widespread problems in the 1998 revision of *The Encyclopedia of the American Left*, published by Oxford University Press. "Entries filled with misstatements and errors" could result just from sloppy scholarship, they note, but the *Encyclopedia* manifests "a pattern of ignoring, minimizing or obfuscating facts that might put American communism in a poor light." Haynes and Klehr contend that only an intellectual culture in which too many scholars regard "historical questions as matters of ideology, not matters of fact," can explain why a leading academic press could publish a volume of "fake history where unpleasant facts are airbrushed away."

Greater nuance and complexity mark the work of more-senior, well-respected histori-

ans of American communism, and Haynes and Klehr find less cause for complaint here, though they rightly upbraid David Oshinsky of the University of Texas for complaining that revisionist historians such as themselves are, in his words, “too zealous in setting the record straight.”

Yet Haynes and Klehr fail to acknowledge the full impact of their work on some of the most accomplished left-liberal scholars. In *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (1998), Ellen Schrecker wrote that American Communists merely “did not subscribe to traditional forms of patriotism,” and she questioned whether their espionage activity represented “such a serious threat to the nation’s security that it required the development of a politically repressive internal security system.” In a new preface to a 1999 edition of her book, however, Schrecker wrote, “I would acknowledge more conclusively than I did [in the original] that American Communists spied for the former Soviet Union.” A year later she went even further, volunteering that “there is now just too much evidence from too many different sources to make it possible for anyone but the most die-hard loyalists to argue convincingly for the innocence of Hiss, Rosenberg, and the others.”

Similarly, Maurice Isserman, one of the most widely respected historians of American communism, acknowledged in the *Foreign Service Journal* in 2000 that the CPUSA’s “few dozen American spies of the 1930s grew to scores, perhaps hundreds,” during World War II. Haynes and Klehr commend Isserman, but their resolute search for every academic who

remains in denial may partially blind them to just how much the scholarly conversation about American communism has changed.

Of course, real differences, both interpretive and political, still exist between Haynes and Klehr on the one hand and left-liberal historians such as Schrecker and Isserman on the other. Haynes and Klehr deem postwar anticommunism “a rational and understandable response to a real danger to American democracy,” hardly a sentiment the Left would endorse. Yet Haynes and Klehr are no apologists for Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose impact on American public life they characterize as “overwhelmingly negative.”

The authors conclude that “despite all the new archival evidence . . . distortions and lies about Soviet espionage go unchallenged” in scholarly volumes such as *American National Biography*, an indictment that is both indisputably correct and undeniably overstated. Thanks in large part to their own work, the historical consensus on the relationship between the CPUSA and Moscow has undergone a dramatic change since the Soviet Union’s collapse. As *In Denial* details, some loyalists still refuse to see that the documentary record has been revolutionized. But Haynes and Klehr’s valid complaints about these unyielding historians ought to be coupled with an acknowledgment of victory in behalf of those whose pursuit of historical truth has been conclusively vindicated.

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Haunted Hawthorne

HAWTHORNE:
A Life.

By Brenda Wineapple. Knopf. 509 pp. \$30

Reviewed by Judith Farr

In Hester Prynne, the passionately honest woman whose scarlet letter “A” marks her as both adulteress and angel, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–64) created one of the

most admirable heroines of American fiction. Forced to exhibit herself for hours on a scaffold with both emblems of her sin at her breast—the infant Pearl and the letter “A”