

The Life of the Party: Experiencing American Communism

Nine years ago, while lost in the serpentine shelves of Powell's "City of Books" in downtown Portland, Oregon, I discovered two books that would change my life: Nell Irving Painter's *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (1979) and Robin D.G. Kelley's *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists in the Great Depression* (1990). The fascinating, intertwined stories in the two books kindled my historical imagination, leading me to write a senior thesis exploring African Americans' interest in the Soviet Union that was a springboard to my studies for my doctoral studies in History at Duke. Painter and Kelley's works also began a passion for collecting books and ephemera on the American radical tradition. My collection has grown considerably over the years to more than one hundred books on the history of American radicalism and nearly as many pieces of political ephemera, from pinbacks and pamphlets to postcards and posters. The bibliography listed below reflects one of the collection's strengths: materials that deal with the personal experience of the American Communist Party. Through memoirs, autobiographies, and biographies we can see the politics of American Communism through the eyes of those who lived through the movement's fleeting triumphs and many tribulations.

My interest in the personal side of the American radical experience is directly connected to my dissertation, which examines the role young people played in the New York Left after World War II. The dissertation focuses particularly on the many spaces throughout the city and its environs where young people came into contact with radical ideas, including cooperative housing projects, progressive private schools, summer camps, labor union youth groups, student activist organizations, and secular Jewish *shules*. Few scholars of radical politics acknowledge how important the social worlds created in these spaces were to the success of radical movements. I rely heavily on my collection of memoirs and biographies to better understand how young people understood radicalism, how their lives were structured by political movements, as well as how and where they laughed, played, learned, and made friends. These books also provide a window into the mindset of Communist parents, how they translated their political commitments into parenting practices and what hopes they had for their children.

A number of pieces of ephemera support the "personal as political" orientation of my book collection. Over the years, I have collected pinbacks from several radical electoral campaigns, May Day celebrations, and communist "front groups," such as the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and the National Negro Congress. Political buttons were not only an important way of raising money for political and activist campaigns, they offered radicals and their allies a means of publicly demonstrating their political affiliations. Several pamphlets in the collection highlight the passionate campaigns that drew people into the movement and sustained their belief in Communism despite the many warning signs that the Soviet Union was not a worker's paradise, but a brutal dictatorship. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's "Woman's Place in the Fight for a Better World" (1947) and Gil Green's "Youth Confronts the Blue Eagle" (1933), for example, document the commitments of these two Communist leaders whose autobiographies are in the book collection. The ephemera collection also documents the many efforts to discredit the Communist Party, such as a poster that lists the many communist front groups housed in Union Square in New York City, and two postcards

that attempted to damage the reputation of Martin Luther King, Jr. by highlighting his attendance at the Highlander Folk School in 1957. Through these pieces of material culture and the personal accounts in my book collection, we can better appreciate what one scholar dubs the “romance of American Communism”—the ardent attraction that radical politics held for the hundreds of thousands of Americans that passed through the Party’s ranks.

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