



Robbie Lieberman. *The Strangest Dream: Communism, Anticommunism and the U.S. Peace Movement 1945-1963.* Syracuse Studies on Peace and Conflict Resolution. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000. xvii + 244 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-2841-5.

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Did Communism Give Peace a Bad Name?

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The second paragraph of the preface to Robbie Lieberman's *The Strangest Dream* begins "although the much touted 'peace dividend' vanished over the Iraqi desert in 1991, and military spending remained at cold war levels..." (p. xiii). The book ends with an ardent endorsement of the left-wing Center for Defense Information's calls for drastic cuts in American military spending. Whether the American defense budget should be cut is a matter of opinion but Lieberman's factual claim is inaccurate. The level of American military manpower, ships, planes, tanks, artillery and other weaponry has all fallen substantially and have not been maintained at Cold War levels.

Between these political exhortations are a series of chapters on those peace groups that aligned with the CPUSA in the early Cold War, as well as independent peace organizations that Communists entered in appreciable numbers. Also chronicled are controversies about Communists in the peace movement. Looming large are Henry Wallace's Progressive Party; the 1949 Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace (the Waldorf Conference); Paul Robeson's concert at Peekskill, New York, and the Stockholm Peace Petition. Arguments over communism and Communists inside the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Women's Strike for Peace, and the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy are analyzed. Peace organizations that were free of Communist participation or which were critical of the Soviet Union come in for discussion chiefly when they adopt policies to exclude Communists or shy away from cooperation with groups with a more welcoming attitude toward Communists. Consequently, a number of the major and minor peace organizations of this era, particularly the traditional religious pacifist groups, get minimal attention, and prominent peace advocates such as John Swomley of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and

Norman Thomas of the Socialist Party appear chiefly as anti-Communists.

Lieberman's overall point is clear, but the logic used in getting there is not. Certainly she regrets that the pervasive Cold War consensus marginalized the peace movement, and she sees the tainting of the peace movement with communism as contributing to that marginalization and as a blameworthy act. In her view a real discussion over peace has been "stifled for decades because peace was construed so narrowly as tantamount to the containment of communism. Any other notions of peace were treated as suspect for aiding and abetting the expansion of our ultimate enemy, the Soviet Union. Indeed, grassroots peace activism was assumed by many to be dominated by Communist agitators" (p. xiii).

However, she not only allows but insists that Communists and consciously pro-Soviet policies were part of the peace movement. She acknowledges that "although American Communists and those sympathetic to their point of view may have caused damage to the peace movement, drawing attacks simply because of their presence, they also made a contribution in the postwar period, calling attention to issues that merited public discussion: the military budget, nuclear weapons, the Korean War, and U.S. involvement in Indochina" (p. 2).

So what was the solution to this dilemma of the Communist presence drawing anti-Communist fire? She is very clear that the solution was not to exclude Communists from the peace movement. At times she seems to think it improper that those critical of communism should have taken notice of the presence of Communists in sections of the peace movement. At other times, hostility to communism is simply treated as in and of itself reprehensible. Sometimes, however, the issue of communism in the peace movement is treated as government inspired defamation: in Lieberman's words "the idea of that link was actively promoted by the U.S. government

in order to gain support for another sort of peace, one more in line with the cold war consensus of containing the Soviet Union. In smearing everyone who promoted peaceful coexistence government virtually silenced the opposition to the cold war” (p. xv-xvi).

There is an incoherence that runs throughout this book. In Lieberman’s view American Communists “...saw peace as bound up with the fortunes of the Soviet Union” (p. xv). She goes on to state that “Communist agitation for peace was bound up with defending the interests of the Soviet Union, especially guaranteeing its existence and its power (nuclear and otherwise) vis-a-vis the United States” (p. 2), “...Communists were unable to draw a distinction between genuine interest in peace and defending the interests of the Soviet Union – from their point of view, the two issues were one and the same” (p. 5), and “that Communist concerns coincided with Soviet interests was there for all to see” (p. 6). Lieberman further states that the definitions of peace by the Truman administration and the Communists had some of the quality of mirror images with the former arguing that American power was necessary to preserve peace while Communists saw Soviet power as essential for peace. She notes that just as the Truman administration regarded American nuclear weapons as necessary for peace, “...Communists hailed the Soviet explosion of an atomic weapon as ‘a contribution to peace’...” (p. 43). She notes that “clearly, definitions of peace and freedom depended upon which side one sympathized with in the cold war” (p. 43).

What, then, does one make of Lieberman’s insistence that Communists, who she agrees supported Soviet power, genuinely favored peace while approvingly quoting a statement by the American Friends Service Committee that it was not possible for the U.S. “to commit itself both to military preparedness and to carrying forward a ...program of peacemaking.... [T]hese two aims have become mutually exclusive” (p. 14). At one point she states that “I use the term *peace movement* broadly to refer to groups that opposed cold war policies” (p. 14). But more exactly, she means that she includes in the peace movement those groups that opposed *American Cold War* policies. Communists, as Lieberman freely allows, supported *Soviet Cold War* policies but she is at pains to insist that they were legitimate members of the peace movement and “...American Communists had a genuine interest in peace...” (p. xv).

Lieberman also agrees that the Communist tactics in the 1930s and early 1940s left some excuse for non-Communist peace advocates to be concerned about co-

operation with Communists. She writes that in the late 1930s “...Popular Front alliances began to break down as the American Communists changed their line, abandoning peace for collective security during the Spanish civil war, and then muting their antifascism after the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939. After Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, and the United States entered the war in December, Communists took a prowar position...” (p. 9) and “...pacifists, liberals and Socialists ... had seen their organizations destroyed because of the twists and turns of the Communist Party line...” (p. 10). She even allows that “there were certainly instances where Communists were not open about their affiliations with the party, while they worked to make other organizations follow the party line” (p. 15).

Elaborating, she states that the Communists’ “...change in line still offended their allies because of the manner in which it took place – with little concern for democratic process or the fate of organizations. One feature of the Popular Front that contributed to the Communists’ undoing was the fact that they were not open about their loyalties. They were “progressive” just like everyone else involved – until there was a conflict between the organization’s outlook and the Communist Party line” and “the Communists’ shift back to emphasizing peace in order to defend the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939 led to the collapse of the united-front organizations that they had contributed so much to building. By the time the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in 1941 and Communists dropped their isolationism for interventionism once again, it hardly mattered because they had already discredited themselves so thoroughly by their previous abrupt changes in line” (p. 19).

One might think that in view of Lieberman’s explicit confirmation of this history of Communist manipulation of the peace issue that she would find antagonism toward cooperation with Communists understandable, but she does not. Instead, Lieberman regrets that non-Communists “...would neither forget nor forgive...” (p. 10) the CPUSA’s earlier duplicity and laments that Communists’ loyalty to the Soviet Union would be “...unforgivably held against them” (p. 30). In her eyes, the problem was not with Communists but with “...those pacifists who never recovered from their bad experiences with Communists...” (p. 116).

Communists in the postwar period neither regretted nor apologized for their past disruptions of the peace movement, so why should the Communists have been forgiven and why should pacifists have recovered from their bad experiences with Communists? Lieberman’s

answer is Communists “...were no longer much of a force to be reckoned with by the late 1940s” (p. 7) and she chastises veteran peace activist John Swomley, who opposed cooperation with Communists, as among those “...who seemed unable to grasp that the Communists were no longer in the relatively powerful position they had commanded in the 1930s” (p. 116).

She also emphasizes that Communists were forced by their weakened state to operate in the postwar peace movement as individuals; to refrain from taking leadership positions; and to no longer attempt to dominate as they had earlier. Here Lieberman’s chronology is off a bit. Wallace’s Progressive Party is the subject of an entire chapter in *The Strangest Dream*. While Lieberman does not pursue the matter at any length, the Communist role in the Progressive party was as organized and covertly manipulative as any of the episodes that Lieberman assigns to the prewar period. It was only after the disaster of the Wallace campaign (caused in part because Communists acted as they had in the 1930s) that the decline of CPUSA influence set in. And not until 1950, after the exclusions from the CIO and the start of the Korean war, did Communists of necessity adopt less aggressive tactics reflecting their rapid deterioration as well as the increasingly hostile environment.

Lieberman’s treatment of Communists and their activities has a strange quality. At one point she says that “...the duplicity and manipulative tactics of the Communists are indefensible...” (p. 27). “Indefensible” seems clear enough except that the “indefensible” is then immediately defended. The next clause of the same sentence states “...it is important to point out that Communists had good reasons to hide their political affiliations” and in the rest of the paragraph Lieberman expands on this defense of the indefensible.

The privileged status Communists and their activities occupy in *The Strangest Dream* is illustrated in Lieberman’s contrasting treatment of Robeson’s 1949 Peekskill concert and the Socialist Party’s Madison Square Garden rally in 1934. It is not entirely clear why the Peekskill concert is in this book about the peace movement. The Robeson concert was sponsored by People’s Artists, not a peace organization but a CPUSA-aligned music group, to raise funds for the Civil Rights Congress, also CPUSA-aligned and also not a peace organization. The funds were not for some peace-related activity but to assist the legal defense of the CPUSA leaders indicted under the Smith Act. Robeson was also not primarily a peace advocate, although he occasionally acted as a spokesman for the Communist version of peace issues. In any event,

veterans’ groups, angered by press reports that Robeson had called for American blacks not to fight for the United States in a war against the USSR, attempted to block the concert. As Lieberman notes, a local newspaper encouraged them by referring to Robeson as an “...avowed disciple of Soviet Russia...,” noting the Communist links of the sponsoring organizations, and concluding that “the time for tolerant silence that signifies approval is running out” (p. 74).

Hundreds of World War II veterans, led by local American Legion officials, gathered at Peekskill on the day of the concert and blocked roads, rocked cars, harassed and threatened concert goers. A half-dozen local police were overwhelmed by the hundreds of protesting veterans, and the concert was canceled. It was quickly rescheduled, and this time Governor Dewey sent in nearly a thousand state police officers. Once again, furious war veterans assailed the concert site, but enhanced police protection was sufficient to allow the concert, which attracted about 20,000 people, to proceed peacefully and successfully. The veterans, however, stoned the cars of those leaving the concert and about 150 persons were injured, none seriously. Police arrested Peekskill Legion officers for leading the violent protest, but a local grand jury refused to indict.

Communists charged, in the words of the writer Howard Fast, a leader of the Civil Rights Congress, that the Peekskill affair began the “...creeping rot of fascism...” (p. 82) and “...was an important step in the preparation for the fascization of America and for the creation of receptive soil for the promulgation of World War III.”[1] It was not, and nothing illustrated that better than the decision of the Republican governor of New York to send in hundreds of state police to protect a Communist fund raiser from angry American war veterans. Lieberman admits that “Fast’s rhetoric may have been overblown” (p. 82), but in her version of Peekskill, guards furnished by Communist-led unions protected the concert (they are pictured on the book’s dust jacket), and she indicts the state police as participants in the assault on concert goers. This is erroneous. Without the protection provided by hundreds of state troopers, the concert could not have gone on. Despite the intimidation by the veterans, the concert was held, Robeson did sing, and funds were raised for the defense of CPUSA leaders. While the violent harassment of those leaving the concert was a discredit to American civility, the right of assembly and free speech prevailed over mob violence.

In contrast, in February 1934 the American Socialist party held a mass meeting in New York’s Madison Square

Garden to protest the use of military force by Austria's fascistic Dolfuss regime against Austria's large Socialist party. About 18,000 people came to hear such luminaries as Matthew Woll, a leading spokesman of the American Federation of Labor, and New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, a leading urban reformer.

The CPUSA mobilized several thousand of its members to attend the meeting, not, however, in order to hear the speakers. This was a time when the CPUSA regarded liberal reformers and social democrats as "social fascists." A *Daily Worker* extra edition appeared the day of the meeting with a front page editorial denouncing Woll and LaGuardia as "agents of fascism" and stating "for the honor of the heroic Austrian workers, do not permit Woll and LaGuardia to besmirch the heroic revolutionary struggles of our Austrian brothers. Woll must not speak at Madison Square Garden today. The wage-cutting, strike-breaking Mayor LaGuardia has no place at a protest meeting for the Austrian proletarian workers.... He must not be permitted to speak." [2]

Communists marched to Madison Square Garden in formation with banners and placards; even a Communist band showed up with instruments. Socialist ushers let them in but forced them to leave their banners, placards, and musical instruments outside. When speakers began addressing the meeting, Communists rioted: screaming abuse, shouting that Socialists were no better than fascists themselves, and fighting with Socialist ushers who tried to eject them. A senior CPUSA official, Clarence Hathaway, coordinated Communist activities. As the tumult increased, he mounted the stage and advanced on the podium. Socialists forcibly removed him from the stage, and the meeting descended into chaos. Neither Woll nor LaGuardia ever spoke. A mass meeting to protest a fascist atrocity had been broken up, not by fascist thugs, but by Communists. [3] Unlike Peekskill, in this case the rights of free assembly and free speech were denied by mob violence.

Lieberman also discusses the Madison Square Garden incident. She allows that it was "broken up by Communists" and their actions were "clearly outrageous and sectarian" but then she quickly dilutes Communist guilt, repeating the same theme twice: "some observers though the Socialists shared the blame for the fracas that developed" (p. 21) and that "some observers thought the Socialists were as much to blame as the Communists" (p. 28). The net result is that Lieberman treats the unsuccessful attempt to stop the Robeson concert as calling into question America's commitment to freedom while the Communists' successful silencing of the Socialists is

minimized by shifting equal blame to the victims of the Communist mob assault.

There is an episodic quality to *The Strangest Dream*, largely caused by the focus of each chapter shifting from one organization or incident to another, as well as the absence of a central story. However, the prose is clear and jargon free. Lieberman provides a useful bibliography on the peace movement in the early Cold War and the documentation shows impressive archival research. However, on pages 55-56 a long quote is cited to the wrong book and only one of the two authors is listed. The quote itself is entirely accurate and used appropriately, so this is a matter only of inattentive citation, but it does not encourage confidence in the details of other citations.

Notes

[1]. Quoted in David Zane Mairowitz, *The Radical Soap Opera: An Impression of the American Left from 1917 to the Present* (London: Wildwood House, 1974), p. 121.

[2]. *Daily Worker* (16 February 1934), extra edition.

[3]. A private postmortem on the Madison Square Garden riot by the CPUSA Political Bureau is in the CPUSA papers at the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI) in Moscow. (The Library of Congress Manuscript Division has obtained a complete microfilm copy of this collection.) This document suggests that CPUSA leaders had in mind a controlled disruption of the Socialist rally. They had not just Hathaway but twenty-five party cadres scatter around the arena coordinating different sections of the hall. The documents shows that they intended to shout down Woll and LaGuardia but to do so under tight discipline with some other speakers allowed to speak; Communist slogans were to be shouted in lulls. In effect, Communists from the floor would become the de facto presiding authority on who could or could not be heard at the Socialist Party's rally. Earl Browder spoke of the assumption that Communist officials would have "moment by moment leadership and control of our masses." It did not work as planned. Militant rank-and-file Communists, who fully believed the party's "social fascist" thesis, did not wait until Woll and La Guardia appeared or for a signal from Hathaway; instead they spontaneously rioted as soon as the Socialists attempted to start the meeting. As Browder summed it up: "We said, we do not want to break up the meeting, we don't want to take it over, yet we adopted a tactic which created that situation." This thirteen page document ("Discussion on Madison Square Garden Meeting," Political Bureau minutes, 17 February 1934, RGASPI 515-1-3448) is reproduced in part and discussed in Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and K. M. Anderson, *The*

Soviet World of American Communism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 282-291. work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

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