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Alexander Stephan. *"Communazis": FBI Surveillance of German Emigre Writers.* Trans Jan van Heurck. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. xxii + 362 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-08202-9.

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Spies Without Daggers

Alexander Stephan is an angry man. The major source of his anger is that German writers fleeing Nazi oppression were viewed with suspicion by American authorities and subjected to extensive surveillance by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). However, Stephan dilutes his reader's sympathy by admitting in his preface that none of the individuals he studied suffered any ill effects from FBI observation and further confesses that most of them were not even aware that they were being watched (p. x). The title of Stephan's book derives from the FBI's confusion over the bewildering variety of politics espoused by wartime German refugees. Unable to assign them to neat categories agents lumped them together as "Communazis," a term originally associated with the concept of "red-fascism," an idea which gained popularity during the period of the Nazi/Soviet Pact. The FBI's lack of understanding and labeling of refugees from the Third Reich as Nazis particularly distresses Stephan. But he does concede that many of the refugees had ambivalent backgrounds; many were leftists, and some were outright Communists.

Although in a wartime alliance with the Soviet Union, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover viewed Communism with a jaundiced eye and put the American Party under close observation in 1940. Given the fact that the Soviets conducted extensive espionage against the United States during the Second World War, frequently with the assistance of American Party members, Hoover's attitude toward refugee German Communists is not without justification. This is not Stephan's opinion, however, and he makes his disapproval of American policy plain in the first chapter of his book entitled "J. Edgar Hoover's America." Portions of the chapter are very good, especially Stephan's discussion of the growth of the FBI into a federal police and security force as a natural part of Franklin Roosevelt's belief in "big government" solutions to national problems (p. 7). Stephan devotes almost half of his chapter to a discussion of the mechanics of surveillance, the variety of federal organizations interested in émigré activities, and the nature of the FBI docu-

ments that make up the bulk of his sources. This section is very balanced and could serve as an excellent introduction to the subject for individuals planning to do research in government archives or planning to make FBI Freedom of Information Act requests.

Unfortunately the chapter also contains instances of exaggeration and overstatement. One such is Stephan's description of the Palmer Raids which he characterizes as "a series of night-time police and Bureau raids on the homes and businesses of left-wing activists in which thousands of people, many not even foreigners, were rounded up simultaneously in thirty-two cities, imprisoned, interrogated without trial, and often beaten" (p. 11). In fact the raids were conducted in late afternoon and early evening, only foreigners were targeted, and, with few exceptions, all were members of the Communist Party. Bureau agents conducted the follow-up interrogations according to established legal procedures and frequently endured ideological harangues from their prisoners. In my own research on the Palmer Raids in Baltimore I found no incidents of prisoners being abused and only a handful if any (the evidence is ambiguous) who were actually deported. The rest returned to their normal activities and several continued their involvement in radical politics.[1]

The same can be said of the writers featured in *"Communazis"*; without exception they did their best to continue their normal lives after arriving in the United States. Many of the refugees benefited from "lifesaver" contracts from Hollywood studios, which guaranteed them a job and employment for one year (often without having to do any real work) and allowed them to obtain an American visa. However, only a few of the individuals so assisted found job satisfaction in filmmaking. Instead most rallied against the shallowness and commercialism of California and longed for the sophistication of pre-Hitler Germany. Such reactions are typical of expatriate communities anywhere and one of the most valuable aspects of *"Communazis"* is its portrait of the insular, feuding, and sadly marginal life of so many talented individuals.

The reader's knowledge of the intimate details of the California exiles' lives is made possible by the tireless efforts of dozens of men lead by Special Agent R. B. Hood. Hood's people checked the license plates of cars parked in front of houses, traced phone calls, and listened in on the pillow talk between Bertold Brecht and his mistress. All of this effort, which Stephan rightly considers excessive, yielded no evidence of subversion or un-American activities. The only overtly political incident was an aborted attempt to recruit Thomas Mann as president of a possible German government in exile. Previously historians had believed that the attempt failed because of Mann's reluctance to be involved in politics. However, the FBI files reveal that Mann was very interested but federal agents, alerted by the surveillance teams, carefully intervened to discourage the writer because they feared that "Stalinist Germans" like Brecht might take over such an organization (p. 61).

Stephan's chapter on the Los Angeles expatriates is the longest in his book because the majority of exiled writers lived there, attracted by the lifesaver contracts, warm climate, and relaxed lifestyle. New York had a larger German colony (virtually all the exiled political and labor leaders stayed there) but only a few writers chose the Big Apple, mostly because it seemed more "European" to them. The refugee writers in New York also tended to be more political than those on the west coast, which gave the FBI more interesting things to listen to than discussions about visas and work permits. The major concern of the federal agents on the east coast was the persistent attempts of the exiles there to form either a government in exile or at least a committee to speak for all the German refugees. Of particular interest to the FBI were overt communists such as Ernst Bloch and Prague-born Frantisek Carl Weiskopf who was as-

sociated with the anti-Nazi espionage apparatus Rote Kapella. Stephan, rather euphemistically, calls it a "resistance group" (p. 200).[2] One New York figure who gets very little attention from Stephan is the former Comintern agent Richard Krebs, who cooperated with the FBI and wrote the expose *Out of the Night* under the pen name of Jan Valtin. Stephan's only comments on Krebs, who he characterizes as a "shady adventurer," is to note his regular contact with the FBI and the fact that he spent his first night in New York on a park bench (pp. 105, 174).

Stephan's penultimate chapter focuses on the German exiles in Mexico. Founded by Bodo Uhse, a writer and Spanish Civil War veteran, the Mexican colony was very political thanks to the left-leaning government of the Party of Institutional Revolution and the presence of so many individuals who had fought for the Republican cause in Spain. The FBI's primary target in Mexico was the Free Germany Committee, which it characterized as an old style front organization with direct ties to Moscow. A bizarre side benefit of FBI monitoring of the exiles south of the border was the discovery by Stephan of a long lost essay by Anna Seghers on her escape from Europe and the first translation of her masterpiece, the novella *The Excursions of the Dead Girls*. FBI special agents made the translation, which Stephan rates as not bad, although the agent translator criticized the original for lack of clarity. Of the three exile groups surveyed the Mexicans seem to be the one most legitimately targeted by the FBI. Stephan concedes as much but is still appalled at the amount of effort wasted on a relatively ineffective and harmless group contrasted with the slaughter and suffering taking place elsewhere during the war.

In his last chapter Stephan praises the United States for doing as much as it has to make the records of its secret agencies available for public scrutiny, especially when contrasted with the practices of other nations. The United States also receives high marks for its relatively benign treatment of individuals under government observation. Although many veteran American Communists would disagree over the use of the word benign it is impossible to disagree with Stephan's point that American practices were light years removed from the policies of the Gestapo or KGB. What makes Stephan angry is that any government, particularly one as generally liberal as the United States, should spy on private citizens at all. He ends his book with a quote from Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis who wrote a dissenting opinion in 1928 opposing the use of telephone taps by law enforcement agencies. Brandeis concluded that "experience should teach us to be most on our guard to protect liberty when the government's purposes are beneficent ... The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well-meaning but without understanding." The quote eloquently sums up Stephan's motives in writing *"Communazis"*, but he fails to convince this reader that such surveillance should be discontinued. Instead his book serves better as an argument for more intelligent use of covert resources.

Notes:

[1]. Vernon L. Pedersen, *The Communist Party in Maryland, 1919-57* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp. 21-26.

[2]. For more information on the activities of Rote Kapella see V. E. Tarrant, *The Red Orchestra: The Soviet Spy Network Inside Nazi Europe* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1995).

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