

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/>

No. 264

Published on 6 May 2010

H-Diplo Article Review Editor: Diane N. Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Giora Goodman. “The British Government and the Challenge of McCarthyism in the Early Cold War.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 12:1 (Winter 2009-2010): 62-97. DOI: 10.1162/jcws.2010.12.1.62. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2010.12.1.62>

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR264.pdf>

Review by **Hugh Wilford**, California State University, Long Beach

To gain a sense of the importance of McCarthyism as an issue in early Cold War Anglo-American relations, one only has to consider a list of the prominent Britons affected by the political restrictions on entry to the U.S. imposed during the era. Among the names of individuals denied visas or required to obtain special waivers were those of the novelist Graham Greene, poet Stephen Spender, and Iris Murdoch, admittedly not yet the literary star she would become later in life, but rather a brilliant Oxford student prevented from studying at Vassar. To contemporaries who knew something about British intellectual life, Spender’s difficulties must have seemed especially egregious given that, after a youthful flirtation with communism, he had become an outspoken anti-Stalinist, contributing to the classic collection of essays by disillusioned ex-communists, *The God That Failed*. Later on, Spender would even serve as British editor of the CIA-funded *Encounter*, the flagship western journal in the so-called Cultural Cold War. Add to this list of names those of some of the famous U.S.-based actors and entertainers who experienced similar restrictions on their freedom of movement – Charlie Chaplin, movie director Joseph Losey, and singer/actor/campaigner Paul Robeson – and it is not hard to see why McCarthyism came to dominate British perceptions of the U.S. in the period, creating a widespread popular image of a nation in the grip of political reaction and repression.

As historian Giora Goodman shows in this well-researched, fluently written, and constantly interesting article, the travails of cultural celebrities were not the only factor roiling British public opinion. When Senator Joseph McCarthy himself (aided by his young colleague, Robert Kennedy) criticized the U.K. for carrying on its maritime trade with communist China, British politicians, most notably the former Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee, protested vehemently in Parliament. In typical fashion, McCarthy counter-attacked, producing a photograph of “Comrade Attlee” saluting the

International Brigade in Spain and alleging that British-owned ships had carried Chinese troops to fight in Korea. Most observers credited the Junior Senator from Wisconsin with winning this particular round. It was not surprising, therefore, that when McCarthy's young assistants Roy Cohn and David Schine arrived in the U.K. during their ill-advised tour of U.S. information services in Europe, British journalists were lying in wait to ambush them, subjecting the Americans to a barrage of hostile questions. This incident was linked in the British popular imagination to the danger of McCarthyism intruding on Britain itself, with U.K. police forces and security services showing willingness to cooperate with their U.S. counterparts in the hunt for subversives on British soil. Particularly notorious in this respect were official Anglo-American attempts to stop U.S. servicemen based in the U.K. marrying British brides suspected of harboring communist sympathies.

Given the sensitivity of British public opinion on the subject, it was only to be expected that successive post-war U.K. governments, Labour and Conservative, would denounce McCarthy himself. However, as Goodman argues persuasively, such statements concealed a more powerful tendency in Cold War British policy, which was actually to collaborate with the U.S. internal security apparatus behind the scenes. This was manifested in a number of actions, recently illuminated by the files of MI5 (the internal U.K. internal security service, roughly the equivalent of the FBI) released since 2005 under the British Freedom of Information Act, and extensively cited by Goodman: the unprecedented access given to U.S. investigators so that they could interrogate the British-based atomic spy Klaus Fuchs; exchanges of information between MI5 and the FBI about such British "fellow travelers" as the "Red Dean of Canterbury," Hewlett Johnson; U.K. government exclusions of politically undesirable travelers, for example would-be delegates to the 1950 Sheffield "Peace Congress;" and official inaction in the face of calls for assistance from U.K. citizens barred from entering the U.S., such as Labour MP Sydney Silverman, who had hoped to attend a 1953 New York rally in support of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. In all these instances, the British government revealed that it attached more importance to the sensibilities of U.S. officials than those of British citizens.

Why was this? Goodman comes up with several reasons, including, most obviously, Britain's desire to maintain the good will of its more powerful Cold War ally. That said, he might have gone a little further in exploring this question. For example, the internal divisions of the British labour movement – something which Goodman himself wrote about authoritatively in his doctoral dissertation – are relevant here, with Labour Party and Trades Union Congress leaders tending to line up on Cold War issues with the U.S. against communist elements within the movement rank-and-file. In this regard, the doctrinal split within the Labour Party between the Atlanticist "Gaitskellites" and the "Bevanites," determined to pursue a third way in post-World War II British foreign relations, probably at least warrants a namecheck. Perhaps this question also opens up space for larger reflections about differences between the political cultures of the two countries. It is surely telling that, whereas British governing elites were able by and large to subordinate the demands of popular opinion to the dictates of foreign policy and

H-Diplo Article Review

official secrecy, successive U.S. administrations, and for that matter the foreign American intelligence service, the CIA, were badly hampered in their pursuit of Cold War objectives by the populist force of McCarthyism.

On the other hand, Goodman deserves praise for refusing crude judgments and giving proper weight to the nuances of his subject matter. This is a very worthwhile article, which combines some important new documentary discoveries with a firm grasp of the larger context of early Cold War Anglo-American relations.

Hugh Wilford is Professor of United States History at California State University, Long Beach. He is the author of several books, most recently *The Mighty Wurtlizer: How the CIA Played America* (Harvard University Press, 2008). He is currently at work on a book about the CIA and the Middle East in the early Cold War.

Copyright © 2010 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.