

Denise M. Lynn. *Where Is Juliet Stuart Poyntz?: Gender, Spycraft, and Anti-Stalinism in the Early Cold War (Culture and Politics in the Cold War and Beyond)*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021. 224 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-62534-548-6.



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Juliet Stuart Poyntz mysteriously disappeared from Central Park in Manhattan on the evening of June 3, 1937. She was a well-known suffragist, unionist, and worker for the Communist Party in the United States (CPUSA). When people finally started to hunt for her, they discovered that she had not packed up her Manhattan boarding room and had made plans to see friends later in the week. Something very wrong had happened. It was the summer of 1937, at the height of the Stalinist purges. Her friends immediately suspected that Soviet agents had kidnapped her, brought her back to the Soviet Union, and liquidated her. She had, after all, been associated with Trotskyists, had witnessed the show trials of former friends while in Moscow, and had reportedly told people upon her return to the United States that she was considering leaving the Soviet underground.

After her disappearance, many journalists, scholars, and activists, particularly former leftists who denounced Stalin, spent hundreds of hours writing about the life and death of Juliet Stuart Poyntz. Her friend, Carl Tresca, a leading Italian

anarchist-turned-anti-Stalinist, told anyone who would listen in the late 1930s that Joseph Stalin was behind her extradition and murder. Later, Whitaker Chambers claimed to have inside knowledge confirming Soviet culpability in her death. Other eventual defectors from communism corroborated and complicated the story, giving messy and sometimes contradictory evidence of how and why the Soviet leadership got rid of Poyntz.

Denise M. Lynn's contribution to the saga of Juliet Stuart Poyntz is to return to the evidence and piece together a story about her life that is rooted in primary source research—a task that has been long neglected amidst the decades of conjecture that have surrounded Poyntz's story. Lynn does an admirable job of uncovering the details of Poyntz's childhood, chronicling her roots in a family committed to education and activism, her role as a student leader at Barnard College, her early involvement in the suffrage and socialist movements, her turn to unionism and antifascism, and her eventual rise to leadership in the CPUSA in the late 1920s. As Lynn shows, Poyntz's life

mapped on to the tumultuous and splintered history of socialism, unionism, and communism in America. It reflected the alternative avenues through which women rose to positions of political leadership and the non-normative paths that women chose in those years. It also tracked with the power struggles that defined the Soviet leadership in these years, tying the fate of this woman to Stalin's consolidation of power beginning in 1927.

Lynn also untangles the details of Poyntz's disappearance, which remains unsolved. Was she killed in the United States or taken to the Soviet Union to face the living death of the Gulag? Was she lured there, and if so, by whom? Was she betrayed by her lover, her CPUSA handler, or someone else entirely? Or, did she assume another name (something she had done before) and go into hiding, living out a quiet, anonymous life in America? To the extent possible, Lynn tackles these questions, mustering all the evidence we have, but ultimately concludes that there are no answers.

Where Lynn's book makes a real contribution, however, is in her telling of the history of the narratives surrounding Poyntz's life and disappearance. Lynn argues that there is much to be learned from paying attention to how people talked about Poyntz after she was gone. This was a woman who bucked feminine stereotypes throughout her life (never marrying, abandoning her child in order to continue her political work, maintaining lovers, traveling the world alone, and taking positions of leadership that were normally reserved for men). And yet, after her death, those who wanted to talk about Poyntz usually did not dwell on these traits. Instead, they created a persona for her that would be useful in the growing anti-Stalinist crusade. For leftist Americans interested in publicly denouncing their former communism, the retelling of Poyntz's death became a vehicle for the rebuilding of identity and the return to mainstream American acceptance. In an era defined by confession, when one could stand before the House Un-Amer-

ican Activities Committee and regain the public trust by recounting one's sins, being able to talk about, and express disgust over, the death of Juliet Stuart Poyntz was a vital stop on the path to absolution.

As Lynn argues, in order for that absolution to work, Poyntz had to take on an identity that was markedly different from reality. As the 1940s and 50s progressed, it was critical that Poyntz be framed as a victim of Soviet manipulation, a physically attractive, heteronormative, well-intended American woman who was duped into working for a cause that she did not really understand. For ex-communists, this narrative offered a handy tool by which Soviet power could be indicted. It reinforced gendered tropes that allowed them to signal their own traditional stance on society and women's roles in it. It offered a justification for the choices they once made, but which they now renounced, arguing that they, too, had been duped. It also offered a path for confession, which was required if one hoped to participate in the veritable industry of denunciation that catapulted so many former communists to fame in the 1950s Red Scare. The stories about Poyntz's life and death took on an existence of their own.

In many ways, Lynn's book is more a history of those who told those stories than it is of Poyntz herself, showing how certain former American communists framed and orchestrated their return to the anticommunist mainstream in the 1940s and 50s. As Lynn argues, "even before World War II the anti-Stalinist left was shifting toward the anti-communist right," and Poyntz's disappearance was critical in articulating that process (p. 73). In this sense, the book would have been stronger had more context been offered on how this story fits into the larger history of the CPUSA. Certainly, not every American leftist became a rabid anticommunist who wrote books about their return to the mainstream. More clarification in this regard would have made the subjects of the story easier to see. Nonetheless, for scholars and

students interested in unraveling this chapter of American anti-Stalinism and the shift by many former leftists to the political right, Lynn's book offers an engaging and welcome chapter in that saga.

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