

civil rights in the 1950s and early 1960s, how women negotiated gender roles at work, home and neighborhood prior to the revival of the feminist movement of the late 1960s.

The Cold War at Home

At the end of World War II and the emergence of the United States and the Soviet Union as the world's most powerful nations, Americans became increasingly fearful of communism abroad and at home. McCarthyism, named for the Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy who held sensational hearings of "reds" in the government in the 1950s, actually began earlier with the creation of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 1938. Initially chaired by Martin Dies Jr., the committee investigated the charges of communism in several New Deal programs. After it became a permanent committee in 1945, HUAC targeted Hollywood, academics, and the labor movement to ferret out suspected communists but in the process chilled dissent. Yet for all the hysteria about domestic communists, few Americans actually belonged to the Communist Party USA. Its heyday had been in an earlier period, in the 1930s, when the country suffered a tremendous economic crisis and left-leaning movements found appeal for their attacks on the capitalist economic system that had failed many Americans.

Because of their intermittent challenges to corporate power, labor unions not surprisingly came under attack in the hostile Cold War political climate. Unions had attracted communists and other leftists in the 1930s and 1940s, and many labor leaders welcomed dedicated and talented organizers regardless of their ideological stripes. But faced with rising anticommunism and penalties under the Taft-Hartley Act, passed in 1947 to limit labor's ability to strike and harbor radicals, the American labor movement adopted anticommunist measures to retain its respectability. In 1949–1950, the CIO expelled eleven left-leaning unions, exposing them to jurisdictional raids by other unions and weakening the labor movement. The political alliances and machinations among opposing forces preoccupied many unions for over a decade because of Cold War anticommunism.

Questions to Consider: In the following two interviews we read about opposing perspectives concerning the role of and supposed threat of communists in American life.

1. How do the narrators characterize American communists? Why did they or did they not represent a threat?
2. Are the narrators different in their sympathies towards workers? If so, how?
3. How might a controversial subject such as domestic communism shape the way a narrator frames a story about the topic?

Source:
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