

This Paper Kills Fascists: The US's Government's Persecution of Folk Singers, 1930s-1950s

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Both the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) and the folk singers of America advocated and fought for the working class. In the 1930s and 40s, the two entities collaborated to create a force to fight for workers' rights and create a workers' paradise in the United States. At the same time, the Cold War raged between the US and the USSR resulting in wars being waged not only in foreign lands but also within the borders of the United States. The US government corrupted the power of the justice and legal systems for political reasons and targeted folk singers for their connection to the Communist Party and their influence on the American working class. The origins of folk music in working class struggles in the United States truly begin in the late 19th century, flourishing and reaching its peak in the first half of the 20th century.¹ 20th century American folk songs came out of what were called "strike songs" used to protest poor working and prison conditions. Coal miners were among the first to adopt these types of "protest songs" as an organizational tool during strikes.² A famous example of this comes from Harlan County, Kentucky in the early 1930s when, in 1931, Harlan County coal miners entered an intense strike with the operators of the mines. These miners dealt with poor working conditions and starvation wages; their frustration and desperation came to a head as the Great Depression worsened.³ Numerous workers were killed and brutalized by the police force throughout the strike.⁴ The workers sang traditional strike songs and wrote their own as well. "Which Side Are You On?"

¹ Ronald Cohen, *Depression Folk: Grassroots Music and Left-Wing Politics in 1930s America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 23.

² Cohen, *Depression Folk: Grassroots Music and Left-Wing Politics in 1930s America*, 23-24.

³ Jessica Legnini, "Radicals, Reunion, and Repatriation: Harlan County and the Constraints of History," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 107, no. 4 (2009): pp. 471-512, 490.

⁴ Legnini, "Radicals, Reunion, and Repatriation: Harlan County and the Constraints of History," 480.

one of the most famous protest songs of the era came out of this conflict.⁵ Written by folk singer and union organizer Florence Patton Reece in 1931. A decade later in 1941, an infamous folk group called the Almanac Singers recorded the song for their album *Talking Union*.⁶

The Almanac Singers were formed by folk singers Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, and Millard Lampell in 1941. The three would remain the core with other members rotating in and out such as Woody Guthrie, Bess Lomax, Josh White, Arthur Stern, Sis Cunningham, and Pete Hawes.⁷ Most members of the group had ties to the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) and produced songs with themes of class struggle, leftist ideology, and union solidarity.⁸ During the USA's participation in the Second World War beginning in 1941, the Almanac singers became popular amongst not only those on the Left but people from all sectors of the political compass. The nation rallied around antifascist sentiment and traditional Americanism that the folk songs represented as the population reeled over the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the imminent spread of fascism abroad.⁹ However, this support from non-leftist folks quickly disappeared after it was discovered that the Almanac Singers had ties to the Communist Party. If there was one thing that the average American feared equally if not more than a fascist, it was a communist. This fear and alienation of the radical left would continue to grow as the years continued and the Cold War escalated.

⁵ Legnini, 479.

⁶ "Florence Reece, 'Which Side Are You on?'," Florence Reece, "Which Side Are You On?" | Energy History (Yale University, January 1, 1970).

⁷ Aaron J. Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA, 1939-1956*, (London, UK: Repeater Books, 2020), 58-59.

⁸ Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA, 1939-1956*, 60.

⁹ Robbie Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-50* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 55.

As the Cold War escalated and fear of communist infiltration in the US worsened, the US government began to crack down hard on the CPUSA and anyone they could label a Communist, which was often leftist entertainers. Folk singers, including Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, became a particular target for their historical ties to the Communist Party and working-class struggles.¹⁰ The FBI in collaboration with various other branches of the US government spent decades targeting and persecuting American Communists or those they perceived to be communist.¹¹ During this time the US government thwarted the rights of American citizens for political justice and there existed a deeply ingrained fear that the American democracy and capitalist system was under threat both abroad and at home.

The American government uses political justice in times of social and economic conflict. During times of heightened stress, the Bill of Rights which outlines human rights such as freedom of speech are often ignored due to concerns for the safety and stability of the American government. An extreme example of this would be the incarceration of Japanese Americans during the Second World War in government sanctioned internment camps.¹² The American government also suspended the rights of the Communist Party USA during the start of the Cold War and the initial Red Scare. The US government created a “multi-faceted campaign” that criminalized communism at an organizational level as well as berating communism at an ideological level, essentially outlawing communism in the US. Therefore, anyone associated with communism at any level was systematically removed from the government and social

¹⁰ Aaron J. Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA, 1939-1956*, (London, UK: Repeater Books, 2020), 60.

¹¹ Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA, 1939-1956*, 13.

¹² Michal R. Belknap, *Cold War Political Justice: The Smith Act, the Communist Party and American Civil Liberties* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 4.

institutions.¹³ Civil servants were not the only ones being targeted, artists and union leaders were also targeted as they were deemed influential to the masses and able to spread communism at a greater rate than the average American communist.

One of the most influential arms of that campaign was the Smith Act. The Smith Act was a statute passed in June of 1940¹⁴ and the Act signaled a drastic shift in the protection of free speech.¹⁵ Also known as the Alien Registration Act of 1940; the Smith Act was adopted because of the congressman who sponsored the law, Howard Smith. The law was called the Alien Registration Act because it mandated fingerprinting and registration of non-US citizens - “aliens.” The Act also criminalized the Communist Party by making it against the law to “knowingly or willfully advocate, abet, advise, or teach the duty, necessity, desirability, or propriety of overthrowing or destroying any government in the United States by force or violence.” The Act also made printed material such as pamphlets featuring communist messages that they deemed fit into the category of “advocating the overthrow of the government” illegal as well. Lastly, the act made it illegal to “organize or help to organize any society, group, or assembly of persons who teach, advocate, or encourage the overthrow or destruction of any government in the United States by force or violence.”¹⁶ The Act’s legalization forced the CPUSA and other leftist organizations to go underground in order to escape persecution. This Act, and significantly the last point of the Act, was used throughout the following decades to

¹³ Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA, 1939-1956*, 13.

¹⁴ Donna T. Haverty-Stacke, “Punishment of Mere Political Advocacy’: The FBI, Teamsters Local 544, and the Origins of the 1941 Smith Act Case,” *Journal of American History* 100, no. 1 (June 2013): pp. 68-93, 68.

¹⁵ Haverty-Stacke, “Punishment of Mere Political Advocacy’: The FBI, Teamsters Local 544, and the Origins of the 1941 Smith Act Case,” 71.

¹⁶ Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA, 1939-1956*, 52-53.

justify political imprisonments of communists and other leftist folks who disagreed or went against the US government.

Two committees were also formed within the US government to systemically target, harass, and arrest communists. These were the McCormack-Dickstein Committee, which was formed February 1934,¹⁷ and the Dies Committee, which was formed in 1938. The Dies committee would become known as the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)¹⁸ and became a major player in the targeting and persecution of communist, or communist supporting, folk singers and other artists and intellectuals. The McCormack-Dickstein Committee was created by Congressman Samuel Dickstein (D., NY) to investigate “un-American activities.” Such activities were arbitrary for the most part but often characterized by ideologies differing from American capitalism and the current democracy in place. The House supported Dickstein’s idea and appointed John McCormack (D., Mass) to oversee the investigating body. The committee proposed these laws to “defend the rights of liberties of the American people” The committee did not only go after the CPUSA, they also investigated fascism and Nazism, although two-thirds of their report was dedicated to left-wing activities.¹⁹ The House Un-American Activities Committee was proposed by Representative Martin Dies Jr. of Texas. The resolution to create the committee was overwhelmingly passed with the vote being 194-41. Some of the representatives who voted in favor of the committee did so primarily to target Nazi groups and activities. Dies, however, was a staunch anti-communist with a particular hostility towards radicalism; Dies later became the chair of the committee and used his power to persecute those he believed had ties to the Communist Party or the radical left. The first HUAC

¹⁷ Belknap, *Cold War Political Justice: The Smith Act, the Communist Party and American Civil Liberties*, 17.

¹⁸ Belknap, 21.

¹⁹ Belknap, 17.

hearings labeled 640 organizations, 483 newspapers, and 280 labor unions as having ties to the Communist Party or possessing communist ideology²⁰

As anti-communism increased in the United States in the years following the end of the Second World War, anti-communist laws were not the only thing attacking American communists. Author and historian Robbie Lieberman wrote, “Local, state, and federal legislation and committees, as well as self-appointed vigilantes, harassed individuals, groups, and institutions. People were fired from their jobs; discriminated against in housing, social security, and unemployment benefits; and deported.”²¹ All across the nation the government was systemically criminalizing the Communist Party.

During the initial Smith Act trials, a leftist group known as People’s Artists planned out a benefit concert to help aid the Civil Rights Congress in their defense of the Smith Act defendants.²² It was set to take place during Labor Day weekend 1949 in the New York State suburb of Peekskill. Paul Robeson, a Black singer and actor, was the headliner of the event and hundreds of leftists had come out to watch the concert.²³ Due to Robeson and the People’s Artists known connection to the CPUSA, word quickly spread that the concert was in fact to benefit the Communist Party. The *Peekskill Evening Star* wrote about the then upcoming event, “It becomes evident every ticket purchased for the Peekskill concert will drop nickels and dimes into the till basket of an Un-American political organization.”²⁴ A parade in advance of the

²⁰ Belknap, 21.

²¹ Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-50*, 11.

²² Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA, 1939-1956* (London, UK: Repeater Books, 2020), 129.

²³ Roger M Williams, “A Rough Sunday at Peekskill,” *American Heritage*, April 1976.

²⁴ Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA, 1939-1956*, 130.

concert organized by the Joint Veterans Council quickly turned into a mob of around 5,000 that ominously descended upon the concert goers. They began throwing rocks and bottles at the people gathered and berated them with a slew of racist and other derogatory slurs such as “commie Jew bitch” and “ni**erlover.”²⁵ The concert goers were then barricaded in by the mob and their cars. Author Aaron J. Leonard described the violence that ensued,

...A group of thirty mostly men and teenage boys, a mix of African American and white Jewish men, were set on by a mob of nearly three hundred who proceeded to violently beat them. In the meantime, those remaining at the concert site-forty-two men and one hundred fifty women and children-were blockaded in.²⁶

During the riot a cross was also burned at the concert site, a traumatic site to the many Black attendees. The New York State Police did not arrive until after midnight to finally disperse the mob. Dozens of people were injured, eight of whom required hospitalization.²⁷ James P. Shenton, an American history professor at Columbia University said, in reference to the Peekskill Riots, “Peekskill opened up what was to become extensive public endorsement of the prosecution and persecution of so-called Communists.”²⁸

The ensuing response from the New York State government further illustrates Shenton’s pretense. Due to public pressure, New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey assembled a grand jury to investigate the riots.²⁹ The handling of the investigation proved how the government sanctioned anti-communist violence, with investigators dismissing the cross burning as an “unfortunate prank” and going as far as to blame the communists, stating, “It was part of the

²⁵ Leonard, 130-131.

²⁶ Leonard.

²⁷ Leonard.

²⁸ Williams, “A Rough Sunday at Peekskill”.

²⁹ Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA, 1939-1956*, 134.

Communist strategy...to foment racial and religious hatred.”³⁰ Essentially, the jury asserted that it was the Communist Party’s politics that led to the violence hurled against them. The Dewey investigation defended the violence used against the Communists, “...the shock troops of a revolutionary force which is controlled by a foreign power and committed to methods and ultimate ends incompatible with our constitutional system.”³¹ In other words, they believed that the mob’s violence was justified due to the threat the Communist Party presented to the United States.

The FBI’s handling of the situation also showed the US government’s bias towards anti-communist sentiment and the persecution of the Communist Party and any and all who supported them. J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI at the time, was already suspicious of Paul Robeson’s affiliation with the Communist Party and had no sympathy for the Communists in the aftermath of this ordeal. When a letter was written to the FBI asking for an investigation into Robeson in connection to the Communist Party, Hoover quickly replied, “You may be sure the thoughts which prompted your communication are appreciated and I am grateful for your action in making available to me the view outlined in your letter.”³² Tellingly, he also received a letter around this time asking for an investigation into the American Legion, who were responsible for organizing and participating in the Peekskill Riots, he responded curtly that it was “being made a matter of record in the files of this Bureau.”³³ After the letter was received by

³⁰ Leonard, 135.

³¹ Leonard.

³² Leonard.

³³ Leonard, 136.

Hoover he promptly had the writer of the letter investigated under suspicion of Communist ties, although nothing substantial was found.³⁴

HUAC and the Smith Act, along with the support of the FBI and other government entities, would go on to terrorize and criminalize thousands of communist and communist adjacent figures, including some of America's most prominent folk singers. One folk singer who was a persistent target of HUAC and the FBI was Pete Seeger. Seeger was born in New York in 1919 to a well to do leftist family. His father, Charles Seeger, was a musicologist who collected and promoted folk music in the 1930s and greatly influenced young Pete. From a young age, Seeger was entrenched in communist and leftist literature and ideology. At the age of 13 he was reading Communist critic Mike Gold.³⁵ Gold was a fervent believer in the power of what he called "proletarian art."³⁶ He was also one of the first Communists to advocate for the switch from proletarian music often used to folk music. He called for "art rooted in American vernacular..."³⁷

Seeger agreed with Mike Gold's viewpoint on the power of folk music and had a vision of weaponizing folk songs to promote the politics of the Popular Front.³⁸ On December 31st, 1945, Seeger along with a few other folk singers founded People's Songs,³⁹ an organization that hoped to use music as a tool for class struggle, Seeger had a vision of creating a "singing labor movement"⁴⁰ People's Songs' goal was to "talk about life as it really is," doing so with no

³⁴ Leonard.

³⁵ Leonard, 23.

³⁶ John Joseph Brogna, 1982, 2-3.

³⁷ Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-50*, 35.

³⁸ Lieberman, 46.

³⁹ Lieberman, 67.

⁴⁰ Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA, 1939-1956*, 93.

commercial incentive in mind. A recruiting document for People's Songs explained that "...they [the founding folk singers] started this organization they called People's Songs, Inc. to spread these songs around, to bring them to as many people as possible, the true democratic message that came out of this music."⁴¹ Two important jobs of People's Songs were outlined in a pamphlet titled "Organize a People's Songs Branch," one was "Songs as a political weapon, an organizing weapon" another was "Throughout emphasize the value of music for brotherhood and peace."⁴²

The ultimate goal of People's Songs was to spread leftist politics to "the people" by speaking to them in a language they understand: folk songs. "The people" mainly meant the working class but extended to everyone except prolific capitalists and racists who they saw as going against "the people."⁴³ The preamble to their constitution read,

We believe that songs of any people truly express their lives, their struggles, and their highest aspirations...And we extend a welcoming hand to anyone, no matter what religion or creed or race or nation, who believes with us that songs must bring about a stronger unity between all people to fight for peace, for a better life for all, and for the brotherhood of man.⁴⁴

Pete Seeger and People's Songs truly believed that folk music had the power to improve people's lives and fortify the unity of the proletariat.⁴⁵

Songs that were not only topical but also catchy and well written had the potential to spread the political message of the Songsters to those outside the Left, therefore recruiting more

⁴¹ Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-50*, 68.

⁴² Lieberman, 71.

⁴³ Lieberman.

⁴⁴ Lieberman.

⁴⁵ Lieberman, 72.

and more people to their cause.⁴⁶ Folk songs were a way to make CP politics fun and inclusive to all people, not just the intellectual elite who had historically dominated the Party.⁴⁷ However the CPUSA did not share the Songsters belief that folk music could be weaponized in the fight for workers' rights or left wing politics and were all in all dismissive of the group.⁴⁸ Even though most members of People's Songs were also members of the Communist Party, the CP did not publicly endorse or give money to the Songsters.⁴⁹

One figure who exemplifies the notion of folk songs as a tool for class struggle is folk singer Woody Guthrie.⁵⁰ Born in 1925, Guthrie was the third of five children born to Charley and Nora Guthrie. Guthrie's mother originally got him into music by singing hymns and spiritual songs around the house.⁵¹ Guthrie became a traveling worker at a young age after family tragedy left him to fend for himself as a teenager.⁵² He wrote of this time in his autobiography *Bound for Glory*,

I was thirteen when I went to live with a family of thirteen people in a two-room house. I was going on fifteen when I got me a job shining shoes, washing spittoons, meeting the night trains in a hotel up in town. I was a little past sixteen when I first hit the highway and took a trip down around the Gulf of Mexico, hoeing figs, watering strawberries, picking mustang grapes...⁵³

⁴⁶ Lieberman, 73.

⁴⁷ Lieberman, 82.

⁴⁸ Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA, 1939-1956*, 99.

⁴⁹ Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-50*, 76-77.

⁵⁰ Richard A. Reuss, "Woody Guthrie and His Folk Tradition," *The Journal of American Folklore* 83, no. 329 (1970): pp. 273-303, <https://doi.org/10.2307/538806>, 275.

⁵¹ Mark Allan Jackson, "Rambling Round: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie: Articles and Essays: Woody Guthrie and the Archive of American Folk Song: Correspondence, 1940-1950," *The Library of Congress (The Library of Congress)*.

⁵² Jackson, "Rambling Round: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie: Articles and Essays: Woody Guthrie and the Archive of American Folk Song: Correspondence, 1940-1950".

⁵³ Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton, 1943), 162.

While a migrant worker during the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, Guthrie became entrenched in leftist politics.

The Great Depression, a global economic downturn that lasted a decade from 1929-1939,⁵⁴ prompted folk singers, along with thousands of other desperate Americans, to turn to communism as a solution to this economic and social strife. The CPUSA saw a surge in worker involvement in unions and left-wing politics.⁵⁵ Between 1930 and 1940 union membership in the US more than doubled.⁵⁶ Just as communist ideology saw an increase during the Great Depression so did folk songs. Folk songs described hardship and class struggle which deeply resonated with the thousands of Americans financially destitute with the unemployment rate reaching twenty percent at the height of the depression.⁵⁷ Music defined the Depression as Americans looked to the future for a new political, economic, and cultural era, using lyrics about “hard-luck” and hope of governmental programs that would improve their lives.⁵⁸

No folk singer’s music better defined the time than Woody Guthrie’s. In one of his most famous songs, “I Ain’t Got No Home in This World Anymore” the opening verse encapsulates the migrant workers plight, “I ain’t got no home, I’m just a-roamin’ ‘round, / Just a wandrin’ worker, I go from town to town. / And the police make it hard wherever I may go / And I ain’t got no home in this world anymore.”⁵⁹ Guthrie spoke the language of the American worker because he *was* an American worker. Unlike Pete Seeger who grew up in a life of relative

⁵⁴ Christina D Romer, “Great Depression,” Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., July 20, 1998)

⁵⁵ Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-50*, 3.

⁵⁶ Romer, “Great Depression,” Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., July 20, 1998)

⁵⁷ Romer.

⁵⁸ Ronald D. Cohen, *Depression Folk: Grassroots Music and Left-Wing Politics in 1930s America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 37.

⁵⁹ Woody Guthrie, “I Ain’t Got No Home in This World Anymore,” track 11 on *Dust Bowl Ballads*, Victor Records, 1940, Apple Music.

privilege but wished to uplift the American proletariat as part of his political and moral ideology, Guthrie fought and sang to uplift the American proletariat because he knew what it was like to have his livelihood depend on rich capitalist owners.

Guthrie's song "Pretty Boy Floyd" also revealed his attitude towards the ruling class. In the last two verses of the song he wrote, "...I've seen lots of funny men / Some will rob you with a six-gun / Some with a fountain pen... You won't ever see an outlaw / Drive a family from their home."⁶⁰ In this song Guthrie points out the exploitation of working-class families by big banks and landlords forcing families to become homeless during the nation's worst economic downturn.⁶¹ These songs along with many others show Guthrie's political leaning and, more importantly, the rationale behind his political leaning.

Guthrie believed socialism was what the nation needed, calling it the "big job." He wrote, "the job to be done,...is to get this thing called socialism nailed and hammered up just as quick as we can... We've got to pay whatever it costs us to get socialism in here just as early as we can."⁶² After joining in leftist politics in 1936, Guthrie became adamant not only about music for the sake of music but also the power of proletariat art in the class struggle.⁶³ It is debated whether or not Woody Guthrie was an official member of the Communist Party. Actor and Communist Will Greer said "Woody was never a party member, because he was always considered too eccentric by the party apparatus," However two of Guthrie's friends and fellow Almanac Singers Gordon Friesen and Sis Cunningham told author Ronald Radosh in a 1970s interview that Guthrie was a

⁶⁰ Woody Guthrie, "Pretty Boy Floyd," track 3 on *Dust Bowl Ballads*, Victor Records, 1940, Apple Music.

⁶¹ Romer, "Great Depression".

⁶² Ronald Radosh, "The Communist Party's Role in The Folk Revival: From Woody Guthrie to Bob Dylan," *American Communist History* 14, no. 1 (February 2015): pp. 3-19, 7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14743892.2015.101330>.

⁶³ Radosh, "The Communist Party's Role in The Folk Revival: From Woody Guthrie to Bob Dylan," 7.

member of the same Communist Party club that they were.⁶⁴ Pete Seeger also appeared on American television in the 1980s and said for the first time publicly, “Woody and I were communists.”⁶⁵

Guthrie first got in hot water over his political views while hosting a radio show on KFVD in Los Angeles called *The Woody and Lefty Lou Show*. He was fired from the very successful show for a song he wrote defending the Nazi-Soviet pact during the Second World War. The song goes as follows: “I see where Hitler is a-talking peace / Since Russia met him face-to-face / He just had got his war machine a-rollin’ / Coasting along, and taking Poland. / Stalin stepped in, took a big strip of Poland and gave / the farm lands back to the farmers. / A lot of little countries to Russia ran / To get away from this Hitler man / If I’d been living in Poland then I’d been glad Stalin stepped in- / Swap my rifle for a farm. / Trade my helmet for a sweetheart.”⁶⁶ The Nazi-Soviet Pact caused a rift in the CPUSA. Many Communists were disgusted with the USSR for creating a pact with Hitler while others, like Guthrie, saw it as Stalin paving the way for peace.⁶⁷ The Nazi-Soviet Pact further soured the American attitude towards the USSR and the Communist Party. The term “Red Fascism” was coined during the pact and led many Americans to equate Communism with Fascism and other forms of right-wing totalitarianism.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Radosh.

⁶⁵ Radosh, 7-8.

⁶⁶ Radosh, 8-9.

⁶⁷ Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-50*, 7.

⁶⁸ Les K. Adler and Thomas G. Paterson, “Red Fascism: The Merger of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in the American Image of Totalitarianism, 1930's-1950's,” *The American Historical Review* 75, no. 4 (April 1970): pp. 1046-1064, 1063.

Guthrie was not entrenched in Cold War politics or the bureaucratic side of the Communist Party. What mattered most to Guthrie was fighting for workers' rights. Ed Robbin, a member of the CP who also had a show on KFVD at the same time Guthrie did, had this to say about Guthrie's politics, "It didn't matter whether he was talking about Harlan County, Jerusalem, Oklahoma, or Cairo. He didn't bother to read what Karl Marx had written, or Lenin. Woody believed that what is important is the struggle of the working people to win back the earth, which is rightfully theirs. He believed people should love one another and organize into one big union."⁶⁹ This was key to the folk movement in general; it was not about party politics, but rather about creating unity among workers to further the cause of the rights of workers. When it came to people linking folk music to this cause, no one was more influential than Guthrie.⁷⁰

The government's attitude towards communism was one of open hostility. The Internal Security Act of 1950, also known as the McCarran Act, stated, "In the United States those individuals who knowingly and willfully participate in the world communist movement, when they so participate, in effect repudiate their allegiance to the United States."⁷¹ In the 1950s the FBI started to truly go after folk singers they believed had ties to the Communist Party. Throughout the 1940s and 50s, the FBI kept extensive files on a number of folk singers, including Pete Seeger⁷² and Woody Guthrie.⁷³ They used the singers ties to the CPUSA to stalk, harass, and eventually in Pete Seeger's case, take them to trial. Folk singers and other leftist

⁶⁹ Cohen, *Depression Folk: Grassroots Music and Left-Wing Politics in 1930s America*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 90

⁷⁰ Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-50* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 43.

⁷¹ "McCarran Internal Security Act [1950]," History Central.

⁷² "Peter Seeger: Digitized FBI Files under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)," National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives and Records Administration, 2016).

⁷³ "Woody Guthrie: Federal Bureau of Investigation," Internet Archive, 2016.

entertainers were of particular interest to the FBI because of their appeal to American youth. Entertainment was required to “build and maintain the Party spirit.”⁷⁴ Entertainers were not the only ones being targeted, any person with ties or alleged ties to the Communist Party had a target on their back. In July of 1950, 11,930 individuals were on the Security Index, the FBI reported that 11,491 of those were identified as members of the Communist Party.⁷⁵ This hostility coupled with the Smith Act led to the imprisonment of nearly all CP leaders in the US under indictment, forcing many others to go underground.⁷⁶

The fear of indictment as well as internal frustrations with the Party led many members to leave the Party and become informants to the FBI or testify against their former comrades, as was the case with Harvey Matusow, a member of the CP as well as People’s Songs. Matusow, after being accused of white chauvinism by other members of the CP, left the Party and soon became vehemently anti-communist. In February 1952, Matusow testified before HUAC and identified folk singers who were part of People’s Songs. These included Pete Seeger, Boots Casetta, Irwin Silber, Betty Sanders, and Woody Guthrie.⁷⁷ His testimony would lead to the blacklisting of these artists⁷⁸ and form the basis of government targeting and harassment of nearly all the folk singers he named.⁷⁹

Many folk singers were called to testify before HUAC. Many used the opportunity to distance themselves from the Communist Party and avoid further persecution as well as get their

⁷⁴ Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA, 1939-1956*, 157.

⁷⁵ Leonard, 160.

⁷⁶ Leonard, 168.

⁷⁷ Leonard, 172-175.

⁷⁸ M. Bromberg and G. A. Fine, “Resurrecting the Red: Pete Seeger and the Purification of Difficult Reputations,” *Social Forces* 80, no. 4 (June 1, 2002): pp. 1135-1155, 1140.

⁷⁹ Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA, 1939-1956*, 176.

names off the blacklist for the sake of their livelihoods. These included Josh White, Millard Lampell, and Burl Ives. White and Ives heavily denounced their former involvement in the Communist Party, Lampell on the other hand refused to cooperate with the authorities, invoking his fifth amendment right.⁸⁰ Lampell summed up about his feelings about the hearings in his closing statement:

Now that the hearings have recessed, it has been proposed in some quarters that I take steps to “clear” myself in some public forum. I feel a great temptation to do this. Certainly it would make life easier for me. It would ensure me much lucrative work period but it would also contribute to setting up a political standard which other writers would have to meet if they wish to continue their careers. It would make me a party to providing the conditions for a blacklist. It would be a repudiation of the position of the authors league against determining a writers employment on any basis other than the merit of his work period this I cannot do. I cannot seek to take out a personal insurance policy, leaving it to be paid for by my fellow men.⁸¹

Lampell’s statement speaks volumes to the detriment of governmental persecution to the American arts and the American people. The United States, the so-called land of the free, had made political hostages out of thousands of their citizens simply for adherence to an opposing political and economic ideology.

By 1950 the Communist Party was in dire straits as its membership plummeted and it lost nearly all ties with the labor unions.⁸² Pete Seeger could no longer justify staying in the Party and left that year.⁸³ Even though Seeger had officially left the Communist Party USA he still maintained a relationship with the Party and maintained the political beliefs that aligned with much of the CP. He was not attempting to conceal this fact, which meant to the FBI he was still

⁸⁰ Leonard, 184-186.

⁸¹ “Lampell Statement,” Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, September 9, 1952, 4-5.

⁸² “FOIA: FBI Employees: Kirkpatrick, Theodore - 1,” Internet Archive, June 11, 2013, 408.

⁸³ Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA, 1939-1956*, 177.

an active threat.⁸⁴ In August of 1955, Pete Seeger was called to testify before HUAC. Many of New York's artists were called to testify during this time as well, under the basis of "alleged Communist infiltration of the New York entertainment industry."⁸⁵ Folk singer Lee Hays was also called to testify during this round of HUAC hearings⁸⁶, and was less cooperative on the stand than Seeger. During questioning he stated:

I am not going to answer any questions as to my associations, my philosophical or religious beliefs, or how I voted in any election or any of these private affairs. I think these are very improper questions for any American to be asked, especially under such compulsion as this.⁸⁷

Seeger's conviction that the United States government did not have the authority to inquire about the personal or political position of its citizens was one of patriotism and morality. However, he would pay professionally for his firm moral inclinations. Unlike many other communists called before HUAC, Seeger did not invoke his Fifth Amendment rights, instead opting for his First Amendment rights.⁸⁸ He claimed that his refusal to testify was protected by freedom of speech, assembly, expression, religion, and petition described in the First Amendment.⁸⁹

Due to his refusal to cooperate with the committee in 1956 he was given ten counts of contempt of Congress. He was eventually convicted in 1961 and sentenced to a year and a day in prison. Although in 1962, less than a day into his sentence, his conviction was overturned by the

⁸⁴ Leonard, 216.

⁸⁵ Bromberg, "Resurrecting the Red: Pete Seeger and the Purification of Difficult Reputations," *Social Forces* 80, no. 4 (June 1, 2002): pp. 1135-1155, 1140.

⁸⁶ Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA, 1939-1956* (London, UK: Repeater Books, 2020), 212.

⁸⁷ Leonard, 218.

⁸⁸ Bromberg, "Resurrecting the Red: Pete Seeger and the Purification of Difficult Reputations," *Social Forces* 80, no. 4 (June 1, 2002): pp. 1135-1155, 1140.

⁸⁹ "First Amendment," Legal Information Institute (Cornell Law).

US Court of Appeals due to “problems with the language of the indictment.”⁹⁰ Because of his blacklisting as well as his indictment Seeger was unable to perform with the same success he had in former years. He made a living playing at summer camps and college campuses and continued to be active in social causes for the remainder of his life.⁹¹ He would remain on the Security Index until the 1970s.⁹² Seeger was honored and celebrated later in life after the Red Scare had died down, being named a Kennedy Center Honoree in November of 1994.⁹³ Later that year Seeger was also honored with the nation’s highest official accolade for artists, the National Medal of Arts.⁹⁴

Woody Guthrie was also a frequent target of FBI harassment. Due to Guthrie being named on the Security Index meant the FBI had to verify his residence every six months. This often proved difficult because Guthrie was constantly moving throughout the United States. As such, the FBI effectively stalked Guthrie to obtain current information on his whereabouts.⁹⁵ FBI Special Agent John S. Todd made frequent reports on “weekly get togethers” between Pete Seeger, Fred Hellerman, and Woody Guthrie among others at actor Will Geer’s house. They also kept tabs on his declining health due to his infliction of Huntington’s chorea. Due to this ailment the FBI, in a moment of mercy, took Guthrie’s name off the Security Index in 1955.⁹⁶ However,

⁹⁰ Bromberg, “Resurrecting the Red: Pete Seeger and the Purification of Difficult Reputations,” *Social Forces* 80, no. 4 (June 1, 2002): pp. 1135-1155, 1141.

⁹¹ Bromberg, 1141.

⁹² Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA, 1939-1956*, 219.

⁹³ Bromberg, “Resurrecting the Red: Pete Seeger and the Purification of Difficult Reputations,” pp. 1135-1155, 1135.

⁹⁴ Bromberg, 1146.

⁹⁵ Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA, 1939-1956*, 197.

⁹⁶ Leonard, 198-201.

they did occasionally conduct reports on him, their last report dated March 13, 1962,⁹⁷ five years before his death in 1967.⁹⁸

In conclusion, the United States government overreached their power and created a hostile environment for America's communists and other left leaning folks. The Us government used draconian means to suppress communism and its left-wing folk singers, ruining countless lives for decades to come. The government's condoning of violence and persecution to those with differing ideologies or those who dared to criticize the government, or the capitalist system has left lasting damage to the American psyche. The viewpoint that ideologies other than capitalism fundamentally betrayed the United States led to corruption of power and subversion of the rights of American citizens by their own government. During a time of nationwide fear and anxiety that lead to the US government cracking down on communism and the liberty of leftists in the United States, artists like Robeson, Guthrie, and Seeger stand out as beacons of freedom and personal bravery.

⁹⁷ Leonard, 231.

⁹⁸ Jeff Wallenfeldt, "Woody Guthrie," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., July 20, 1998).

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