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# Biographies of US and British Twentieth-Century Leftists

## From Early US Cultural Leftism to Stalinism

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Rosalind Eyben, *John Horner and the Communist Party: Uncomfortable Encounters with Truth*, Routledge: New York, 2024; 262 pp., 33 b/w illus.; ISBN 9781032671345, £145.00, hbk; ISBN 9781032670775, £26.99, pbk; ISBN 9781032671352, £22.94, ebk.

Steve Batterson, *The Prosecution of Chandler Davis: McCarthyism, Communism, and the Myth of Academic Freedom*, Monthly Review Press: New York, 2023; 232 pp.; ISBN 9781685900366, \$89.00, hbk; ISBN 9781685900359, \$26.00, pbk; ISBN 9781685900373, \$16.00, ebk.

Robert C. Cottrell, *Martyrs of the Early American Left: Inez Milholland, Randolph Bourne and John Reed*, McFarland: Jefferson NC, 2023; 309 pp.; ISBN 9781476691497, \$55.00, pbk.

There have been many biographies of US and British socialists, communists and other leftists published in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The biographies considered in this review article largely cover the lives of secondary leaders and grassroots socialist and communist activists rather than the most prominent figures. Nevertheless, these profiles provide important insights into twentieth century left history while offering inspiration for present and future leftists as they fight for a saner and more equitable world in the twenty-first century.

### A British Communist Trade Unionist

John Horner's biography has been written by his daughter, Rosalind Eyben, an accomplished social anthropologist, and an Emeritus Fellow at the University of Sussex's Institute of Development Studies. Although she admires her father's positive qualities, she appears unsympathetic towards Horner's CPGB membership and, unlike her older sister, did not join the Party herself. Eyben portrays her father as much more than a trade-union activist interested in left-wing

politics, with his loves and talents for history, writing, oil and water-color painting, chamber music, photography, and sculpting.

John Horner was born in Walthamstow in 1911. His father was an unskilled building laborer. Young John won a scholarship to Sir George Monoux, the nearby grammar school, in 1923. The 1926 General Strike, in which Horner's father participated, accentuated the class differences for Horner between the school's scholarship students and the rest of the student body who came from privileged families. By 1927, Horner considered himself to be a socialist.

Due to his father's influence, Horner became interested in the sea. He served as a South American freight trade shipping business apprentice for four years, and in June 1933 he acquired his Merchant Navy officer's certificate. During the Great Depression, Horner had trouble securing nautical industry work, so in 1934 he leveraged his knowledge and skills to obtain a London Fire Brigade position for which nautical experience was highly valued.

As a rookie firefighter, Horner immersed himself in Marxist writings. He became a Fire Brigades Union (FBU) activist, elected to the London Branch Committee in 1936.<sup>1</sup> At age 27 in June 1939, Horner was elected FBU General Secretary. At this stage he was an (open) Labour Party member and also a secret CPGB member.

FBU membership grew meteorically from 2,000 in 1934 to more than 30,000 by May 1940. By the end of the Blitz in May 1941, the government had established a National Fire Service, something long advocated by the FBU. Moreover, by 1943, communist influence in the FBU was substantial with members at every union level.

In the 1945 British elections, some left-leaning Labour Party branches hoped that Horner would stand as their parliamentary candidate, based on his FBU leadership and oratorical skills. But Harry Pollitt, the CPGB leader, probably convinced Horner that he would be more valuable to the cause as FBU leader than as a sympathetic back bench Member of Parliament (MP). Horner became an open CPGB member in 1945, and was elected to the party's Executive Committee in November that year. In 1946, he was re-elected FBU General Secretary by a substantial majority.

As a CPGB member Horner was excluded from Labour Party events, and as Cold War anti-Communism was heating up, by the late 1940s, he was also barred from Trade Union Congress official positions. Nevertheless, through the mid-1950s, he retained the FBU membership's support while racking up victories for union members. Khrushchev's 'secret speech' in February 1956 led to a personal crisis and 'nervous breakdown' for Horner, but he did not resign from the party until the Soviet invasion of Hungary in October 1956. In his resignation letter, he acknowledged the 'immense material advances made by the Soviet Union' (p.216), contending that while he remained committed to bringing

socialism to Britain, the CPGB was no longer relevant for attaining that goal. He remained FBU leader and rejoined the Labour Party. In 1964, having retired from his union position, he was elected as Labour MP for Oldbury and Halesowen.

Because of the Stalin regime's crimes, Horner remained conflicted about his CPGB membership until his death in 1997. Upon the Soviet Union's demise in 1991, Horner burned his collection of Communist literature in a garden bonfire. The only volume spared was Sidney and Beatrice Webb's *Soviet Communism*. It is unclear what this last act meant, and Eyben does not offer an explanation. Did Horner secretly hope for the Soviet Union's rejuvenation through *perestroika* and *glasnost* during the 1980s? And why did he save the Webbs' *Soviet Communism* from the conflagration? Was it because this was a book written by British social democrats who recognized the achievements of a collective society, albeit attained in a brutal and undemocratic way?

## A US Communist Victim of McCarthyism

Steve Batterson's volume tells the story of Chandler Davis, a University of Michigan math instructor who lost his university position during the Cold War Red Scare.<sup>2</sup> Entering Harvard University in 1942 at age 16, Davis joined the CPUSA while working in a textile factory the next summer. Upon returning to Harvard in the fall of 1943, Davis enrolled in the Navy V-12 program and resigned from the CPUSA in line with Party policy. Military training and rigorous coursework occupied 1944 and 1945 enabling Davis to graduate in mathematics one year early. Before enrolling in Harvard's mathematics graduate program in 1946, Davis was a minesweeper in Florida. Once back at Harvard, Davis rejoined the CPUSA.

Despite his CPUSA membership, Davis was awarded an Atomic Energy Commission Fellowship in 1949. However, due to the affidavit requirement, the CPUSA local branch decided that Davis should remain in the Party, so he declined the fellowship. In 1950, he relinquished his UCLA position after several months because he refused to sign the school's loyalty oath.

Davis was already rethinking his CPUSA membership upon attaining his University of Michigan instructorship. He had concerns regarding the CPUSA supporting the Soviet Union's harsh treatment of dissidents and had come to believe that the Soviet government ruled by terror. Because of the Party's strength, however, Davis remained a Party member although he was politically involved in other groups, and felt that the CPUSA 'was out of steam' (p.64). While visiting his parents in the summer of 1953, Davis took a leave from the Party and then never got back in touch.

In the fall of 1953, HUAC representatives served Davis with a subpoena to appear in Lansing (Michigan) in January 1954 regarding his CPUSA membership. Believing that the HUAC investigations were unconstitutional and hoping that the case would end up before the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS), Davis invoked his First Amendment rights but was cited for contempt by Congress in July 1954. Shortly after the May 1954 HUAC hearings, the University of Michigan president suspended Davis with pay pending an inquiry. The college's Executive Committee could not verify his being (or having been) a CPUSA member and moved towards his reinstatement. However, a subsequent Ad Hoc committee investigation recommended that Davis be dismissed for his unwillingness to reveal past or present CPUSA membership. He appealed the decision to the Bylaw Committee which upheld his termination, ruling that a university professor being a CPUSA member overrode First Amendment rights. He was fired in August 1954.

Unable to obtain another academic position, Davis took a marketing research job on Madison Avenue in 1955.<sup>3</sup> In 1956, despite lower pay, he taught mathematics at the Columbia University night school. In 1957-1958, he was awarded a National Science Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship and a visiting position at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study.

In February 1956, a federal district court trial considered setting aside Davis' indictment. The judge upheld the indictment, determining that Congress had the right to examine Communism's role in universities. In November 1956, the judge ruled Davis guilty on all counts. He journeyed to Cincinnati for the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals' review in April 1958 which was delayed because of the anticipated SCOTUS decision in *Barenblatt*, a related case. In June 1959, in a 5-4 ruling, the Supreme Court determined that HUAC's actions were not a First Amendment violation, thus reconfirming Barenblatt's contempt of Congress conviction.

Two months later, the Sixth Circuit upheld Davis' conviction, primarily based on *Barenblatt*. In December 1959, the SCOTUS denied certiorari with only Justices William Douglas and Hugo Black in favor of hearing the case. He was imprisoned for six months at the Danbury (Connecticut) federal prison where Lloyd Barenblatt also served his sentence.

Davis was still blacklisted in US academia after his release, but through a professional contact he landed an associate professorship at the University of Toronto. He moved to Canada in 1962 where he had a distinguished career as a mathematician while remaining politically active on the Left until his death in 2022.

## Two US Cultural Leftists and an Early Communist: A Suffragette, a Writer-Intellectual and a Writer-Activist

Robert C. Cottrell's volume recounts the stories of three left activist intellectuals in the 1910s who died young. The chapters of the book are interspersed with segments of the lives of Inez Milholland, Randolph Silliman Bourne and John Reed, who were all unique individuals participating in different aspects of left-wing activity and expressing independence of thought.

Inez Milholland was a socialist, largely known for her work in the US suffrage movement during the early part of the twentieth century. Because of her desire to help the suffrage movement and to become financially independent, she chose to study law and enrolled at the New York University (NYU) School of Law. But before entering law school, she had become active in supporting the Uprising of the 20,000,<sup>4</sup> a general strike involving some 20,000 to 30,000 shirtwaist workers in the New York City garment industry. This was the first of several strikes that she championed during the 1910s.

By the summer of 1912, Milholland was featured in *McClure's Magazine* as the most effective and eloquent speaker in favor of suffrage in the United States. She continued to speak and write articles in favor of suffrage for various publications even after earning her law degree. She vigorously opposed World War I, taking part in the voyage of Henry Ford's Peace Expedition ship, the *Oscar II*, which set sail in December 1915.

Milholland died participating in activities that she loved. On a speaking tour out West, she was hospitalized after her last talk in Los Angeles on 23 October, and passed away in November 1916.

Randolph Silliman Bourne was born in Bloomfield, New Jersey in May 1886, to a family that could be categorized as members 'of the town aristocracy' (p.25). At the age of 23, he was awarded a scholarship to attend Columbia University, matriculating in September 1909, where he excelled. He penned articles for the university's literary journal, the *Columbia Monthly*, eventually becoming editor. In 1911, while a university student, he began to write for publications such as *The Atlantic Monthly*. He gained a national reputation as a spokesperson for young intellectuals who viewed progressivism as too limiting and who were inspired by the radical philosophies of socialism, feminism, and anarcho-syndicalism.

Throughout his career, Bourne wrote articles on education, individuals with physical disabilities (such as himself), socialism and radicalism for *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Masses*. He published his first book *Youth and Life* in 1913, and in 1914, he secured a position with *The New Republic* whose inaugural issue appeared in November 1914. While employed there, he published his second and third books, *The Gary Schools* (1916) and *Education and Living* (1916) which cemented his status as a leading educational reform expert. He was actively writing

at the time of his death, perishing in December 1918, a victim of the 1918-1919 global influenza pandemic.

John 'Jack' Silas Reed was born to a wealthy Portland, Oregon family in October 1887. He became a socialist while a student at Harvard University. He worked as a journalist for the *New York Globe* and the *American Magazine*, and in 1911 he also began writing for *The Masses*, a cultural Left publication. He contributed an article on the IWW's 1913 Patterson Silk Strike,<sup>5</sup> and was disappointed when the strike was defeated. He was lauded for his coverage of the Mexican Revolution for the *Metropolitan*, and then traveled to Ludlow, Colorado, where he reported on the 1914 coal strike with amazing aplomb.<sup>6</sup> He vigorously opposed WWI when it broke out.

Reed returned to Russia, which he had first visited in 1915, in time for the Bolshevik Revolution, which he wholeheartedly supported. He worked for the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs' Bureau of International Revolutionary Propaganda and began to pen his masterpiece on the Russian Revolution, *Ten Days That Shook the World*.

After expulsion from the Socialist Party of America's (SPA) 1919 national convention, Reed helped to establish the Communist Labor Party (CLP), which wholeheartedly supported the Bolsheviks, became the CLP's International Delegate, and went back to Russia. Attempting to leave Russia in February 1920, Reed was arrested and convicted by a Finnish court of smuggling diamonds and foreign currencies. On 19 May 1920 he was released suffering from malnutrition, and returned to Petrograd, where he wrote and remained politically active until dying from a stroke in October 1920.

## **Interpreting the Meaning of Biographies of the Lyrical Left and the Old Left**

One way to analyze and understand left biographies is based on the era in which the person lived and was active. Three broad periods can be identified: the Lyrical Left (prior to 1917), the Old Left (1917 to 1960), and the New Left (post-1960). The biographies considered in this essay span the periods of the Lyrical Left and the Old Left. Three of these individuals, Inez Milholland, Randolph Bourne and John Reed, can squarely be characterized as being of the Lyrical Left and two biographies, those of John Horner and Chandler Davis, of the Old Left. Reed, who was of the Lyrical Left,<sup>7</sup> offers a kind of bridge to the Old Left, given his role and activities in the founding of the CLP in September 1919. Horner was a member of the CPGB from the 1930s through the 1950s and Davis of the CPUSA during the 1940s and 1950s, respectively.

The political movements of the Old Left before 1960 were often Marxist in orientation, emphasized economic issues as opposed to cultural ones, and as

such stressed the importance of trade unionization and the working class in promoting social change. While the SPA and the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party were important components of the Old Left, the most significant US Old Left organization from the 1930s through the 1950s was the CPUSA. Similarly, in Great Britain during the same era, the CPGB was one of the major Old Left organizations.

Another theme of Left biographies, especially those of former Communist Party (CP) members, is whether these individuals remained on the Left. This is particularly relevant for CP members because of how they interpreted their *experiences* of feeling betrayed connected with the 1939 signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact, Khrushchev's 1956 secret speech, and the 1956 and 1968 Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, respectively. Some left and became virulent anti-Communists, others quit the Party but remained socialists, while others stayed in the Party. In Left biographies of the pre-Communist era or where the individuals were not CP members, this was not an issue, given that such incidents leading to feelings of betrayal by the organization were less likely to occur.

Apart from John Reed, the subjects of the biographies considered here were second-tier activists and leaders who all made their contribution. Three of them – John Reed, Chandler Davis, and John Horner – were Communists, and although Davis and Horner left their CPs in 1953 and 1956 respectively, they still considered themselves to be on the Left in later life. Reed, Inez Milholland and Randolph Bourne died young so it is impossible to say how their views would have developed had they survived to a mature age. That said, these biographies bring the ideas, activities and the contributions of largely unknown US and British Leftists to light and for that, we can be thankful of these authors' yeoman efforts.

## Remaining on the Left When Others Did Not

John Horner remained a CPGB member because of the positive role that he felt that the Party was the best vehicle for strengthening the FBU and for attempting to bring socialism to Britain. For the most part, he was not concerned with international affairs or the Soviet Union. And after leaving the CPGB, because of his commitment to constructing socialism in Britain, he remained active in left politics.

Even when Davis was a CPUSA member, he never was an orthodox one that religiously towed the Party line. He was always willing to work with an array of ideological leftists, even Trotskyists, and later in life considered himself to have been more in sympathy with the Shachtmanites at that time.<sup>8</sup> Because Davis was committed to left-wing principles in general than specifically to the ideas promulgated by the CPUSA, when he left the organization in 1953, it was not

due to a personal crisis as many members experienced in 1939, 1956, or 1968. This perhaps explains his willingness to pursue his case to SCOTUS even after leaving the CPUSA. His aim was to benefit all leftists, not just those affiliated to the CPUSA.

When asked by Batterson how he could remain so long in the CPUSA given the nature of the Soviet Union, Davis responded that he and his wife Natalie, who was also a CPUSA member, were terrified 'by the repression & brutality we saw in the Soviet Union' (p.65) but because they were not planning to relocate there, this was not an immediate issue of concern. Furthermore, at that time he did not believe that the numbers murdered or imprisoned by the Soviet regime were that large. Natalie Davis<sup>9</sup> remarked that she remained in the CPUSA for as long as she did because she was never fixated on the Soviet Union and did not view it as the socialist model that she was interested in pursuing. She claimed that she only thought about the Soviet Union when it came to issues of foreign policy, and stated that she 'was interested in the promise of SOCIALISM in America, and was also very concerned to fight racial prejudice, repression of free speech, anti-Semitism, and continuing support for the Nazis' (p.66). She was also committed to preventing war as well as blocking the utilization of atomic weapons.

Milholland, Bourne, and Reed, active in an earlier period, were able to exercise more independence in expressing their left-wing views. All three died young, and were never confronted with a centralized, Bolshevized, and Stalinized Communist movement. We cannot know whether, had they lived longer, they would have retained their youthful positions on socialism, or whether they would have moved politically to the right as their contemporary Max Eastman did after the Great Depression.<sup>10</sup>

## **Conclusion: Unsettled Questions and the Legacy of Stalinism**

The subtitle of the John Horner biography, and the title of the book's epilogue, is 'Uncomfortable Encounters with Truth.' We never discover what this means and why this is the case. Why did he still feel haunted by his CPGB affiliation more than three decades after leaving the party? Rosalind Eyben attempted to coax him to discuss this issue after the Soviet Union's demise in late 1991. One might wonder if it has something to do with Eyben herself. In the unpublished autobiography of her older sister Carol, who had been a CPGB youth group member, Carol recounts that Eyben's 'happiest day in her life' (p.218) was when she found out that Horner had left the Party and that she was instructed to go down to the local store to buy every newspaper copy which had frontpage stories on Horner's CPGB resignation. Could it be that Horner felt uncomfortable



talking about this issue with Eyben because she never was a CPGB member or Party supporter? Additionally, perhaps he felt that she would be unable to understand the turmoil that Horner went through upon leaving the Party. Would Horner have felt more comfortable discussing this issue with Carol who had been a CPGB member herself? This is a question that unfortunately remains unanswered.

While many CPUSA and CPGB members were inspired primarily by the Soviet Union, many others, like Horner and Davis, were members of these parties chiefly for domestic reasons. However, a mass exodus from these two parties occurred during the events of 1956 when the truth came out regarding the Soviet regime. Many left these parties following the revelations of Khrushchev's secret speech and/or the invasion of Hungary.<sup>11</sup> US Communist Steve Nelson recalled open weeping among party members on learning of the contents of Khrushchev's speech.<sup>12</sup> If these individuals had been hard-core Stalinists, one would expect them not to behave this way but to express the attitude that in the building of socialism, unfortunate abuses might occur. This suggests that many individuals joined their national CPs, not because they believed that the Soviet Union represented *the* model in constructing socialism, but because of their CPs' role in fighting for trade unionism, struggling for civil rights, organizing against fascism, opposing atomic weapons, etc. and for building a socialism consistent with the political and cultural traditions of their respective countries.

Those affiliated with the Lyrical Left had it 'easier' than those on the Old Left who were confronted with Stalinism. Because there was no state that represented 'real existing socialism' while they were alive, the Lyrical Leftists did not encounter the same problems and issues with which CP members had to deal. All the struggles that these leftists were engaged in during the pre-1917 period were 'purer', whether it was battling for women's suffrage, struggling for victories in IWW-led strikes of super-exploited workers, or for promoting cultural issues in society including sexual liberation.

These biographies portray the varied interests and activities of these individuals, who were all united by their belief in the benefits of a socialist future. Their lives were shaped by their own personal developmental and psychological experiences as well as the historical, economic, cultural, and political factors of the eras in which they lived and worked. Their lives, thoughts, and activities provide a history of the important issues confronting socialists in the past. Perhaps through understanding their complex and difficult experiences, these biographies can provide a roadmap for those on the Left in the third decade of the twenty-first century as they struggle to develop strategies and tactics for creating a better world for themselves, their children, and grandchildren.

## Notes

1. Two excellent volumes on the history of the Fire Brigades Union include Victor Bailey, *Forged in Fire: The History of the Fire Brigades Union*, London 1992; and Sian Moore, Tessa Wright, and Philip Taylor, *Fighting Fire: One Hundred Years of The Fire Brigades Union*, Oxford 2018.
2. For a book that contends that colleges and universities did not challenge McCarthyism but helped to further it, see Ellen Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities*, New York 1986.
3. Ray Ginger of Harvard University also obtained a Madison Avenue advertising job in the mid-1950s after losing his Harvard position. For information on Ray Ginger's life before and after McCarthyism, see Victor G. Devinatz, 'McCarthyism on the Charles: The Life and Times of Labour Historian Ray Ginger before and After His Dismissal from Harvard University,' *Left History*, 13:2 (Fall/Winter 2008), pp.128-150.
4. The Uprising of the 20,000, also known as the New York Shirtwaist Strike of 1909, was the largest strike of women workers in US history up to that time. Useful information on the strike can be found in Richard A. Greenwald, *The Triangle Fire, the Protocols of Peace, and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York*, Philadelphia 2005, pp.25-56 and in Ann Schofield, 'The Uprising of the 20,000: The Making of a Labor Legend', pp.167-182 in Joan M. Jensen and Sue Davidson, *A Needle, a Bobbin, a Strike: Women Needleworkers in America*, Philadelphia 1984.
5. Anne Huber, *The IWW and the Patterson Silk Strike of 1913*, Urbana, IL 1987, contends that a major problem during the work stoppage was the IWW's conflicting objectives – to overthrow capitalism and to win its strike demands. Steve Golin's *The Fragile Bridge: Paterson Silk Strike, 1913*, Philadelphia, PA 1988, focuses on the significance of the workers' culture during the walk-out.
6. There are several books on the Ludlow Massacre, e.g. George S. McGovern and Leonard F. Guttridge, *The Great Coalfield War*, Boston, MA 1972; Howard M. Gitelman, *Legacy of the Ludlow Massacre: A Chapter in American Industrial Relations*, Philadelphia, PA 1988; Scott Martelle, *Blood Passion: The Ludlow Massacre and Class War in the American West*, New Brunswick, NJ 2007; and Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War*, Cambridge, MA 2008.
7. For a treatment of the Lyrical Left in one chapter by the scholar who originally coined the term, see John P. Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left*, New York 1992. A volume covering two cultural radicals of the Lyrical Left is Edwards Abrahams, *The Lyrical Left: Randolph Bourne, Alfred Stieglitz, and the Origins of Cultural Radicalism in America*, Charlottesville, VA 1986.

8. Davis' comment that he realized in the 1970s that he should have been a Shachtmanite rather than a CPUSA member can be found in Alan Wald, 'H. Chandler Davis Was a Lifelong Radical and a Moral Touchstone for the Left,' *Jacobin*, October 6, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/10/h-chandler-davis-lifelong-radical-communism-academia-obituary>.
9. Dr. Natalie Zemon Davis (1928-2023) was a prominent historian who taught history at the University of California-Berkeley before becoming the Henry Charles Lea Professor of History at Princeton University. She was awarded the National Humanities Medal (United States) and the Ludwing Holberg International Prize. This information on Dr. Natalie Davis can be found in David Palumbo Liu, 'Chandler Davis: Dissent and Solidarity,' *Against the Current*, No. 229, March/April 2024. <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc229/chandler-davis-dissent-and-solidarity/>
10. Max Eastman (1883-1969) was an American writer and well-known left-wing political radical in the early twentieth century in New York City's Greenwich Village. Considering himself a socialist, he served as *The Masses* editor before co-founding *The Liberator*. A supporter of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the Soviet Union, he became increasingly disillusioned with communism and socialism before turning into an anti-Communist and a free market supporter. An excellent biography which covers Eastman's political transformation is Christoph Irmscher, *Max Eastman: A Life*, New Haven, CT 2017.
11. Around 7,000 CPGB members left the party in the aftermath of 1956, including many industrial workers and trade unionists. See e.g. John Saville, 'The Twentieth Congress and the British Communist Party', in Ralph Miliband and John Saville, eds, *Socialist Register 1976*, London 1976, pp.1-23; and. Paul Flowers, 'The Unexpected Denunciation: The Reception of Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' in Britain', *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*, 47: 2, (2019), pp.289-329.
12. For reports of US Communists crying upon learning of the contents of Khrushchev's secret speech, see Steve Nelson, cited in Albert Fried, ed., *Communism in America: A History in Documents*, New York 1997, pp.394-395.