

Zinn perpetuates myth of 1950s anti-Communist “book burning”

Criticism of Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, Chapter 16: A People’s War

In Chapter 16 of *A People’s History of the United States*, Howard Zinn uses a string of half-truths to present a stilted portrait of legendary Cold Warrior, Sen. Joseph McCarthy. In a clear allusion to the Nazi book burnings of the early 1930s, Zinn presents McCarthy as a paranoid bully, chasing down innocent Foreign Service workers and ordering the removal and destruction of any texts he personally deemed too subversive. According to Zinn,

As chairman of the Permanent Investigations Sub-Committee of a Senate Committee on Government Operations, [Senator Joe McCarthy] investigated the State Department’s information program, its Voice of America, and its overseas libraries, which included books by people McCarthy considered Communists. The State Department reacted in panic, issuing a stream of directives to its library centers across the world. Forty books were removed, including *The Selected Works of Thomas Jefferson*, edited by Philip Foner, and *The Children’s Hour* by Lillian Hellman. Some books were burned.¹

Every sentence of Zinn’s paragraph above is factually accurate. But, when taken altogether, the effect of Zinn’s anecdotes is to conceal the true nature of the situation. The sole purpose of these overseas libraries under federal law was to promote anti-Communist literature internationally. The presence of even a single pro-Communist work would seem to stand at odds with that stated goal. While the number of books ultimately removed is unclear, substantially more than forty pro-Communist books were found in these libraries. Senate Sub-Committee estimates were as high as 30,000 such books worldwide. The Communist party membership of many of the authors was more than McCarthy’s opinion. Among the books found were those by the then current General Secretary of the Communist Party in America. State Department officials reacted in panic largely because their efforts to subvert U.S. initiatives abroad had been discovered and could have easily led to additional scrutiny which would have revealed their own ties to the Communist Party and the Soviet Union.

These were not private libraries. These were not even general interest public libraries, where the argument could be made that in the American tradition of the First Amendment, diverse viewpoints could and should be available. The State Department maintained these libraries pursuant to a statute intended to support pro-U.S. anti-Communist propaganda efforts internationally; or as the State Department put it, “to utilize...books and related materials to advance the idea of America in the struggle against Communism.”²

There were considerably more than 40 works by Communists, Communist sympathizers, or that in their copy promoted Communism or the Soviet Union. The sub-committee estimated as many as 30,000 books by Communists and Communist sympathizers on the shelves of the State Department’s overseas libraries.³ In the book *Howard Fast*, scholar Gerald Sorin writes that library staff initially estimated as many as four hundred the number of authors whose books

¹ Howard Zinn. *A People’s History of the United States* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics; Reissue edition, Kindle, November 17, 2015), 9278. <http://a.co/aG5aBfX>

² *Ibid*, 9174. Public Law 402 enacted in 1948.

³ *Ibid*, 9182.

needed to be removed,⁴ and according to journalist M. Stanton Evans, the pro-Communist works on offer at these libraries far outnumbered the number of anti-Communist works.⁵

Furthermore, it was not the unsupported opinion of McCarthy that these authors were Communist. This was the fact of the matter. Many of these authors were prominent members of the Communist Party of the United States. According Evans, among the authors were former General Secretary of the Communist Party of the U.S.A. Earl Russell Browder and his immediate successor William Z. Foster, who was still serving as General Secretary when the investigation into the State Department's overseas libraries took place in the mid-1950s.⁶ Others were known or suspected Soviet agents. According to a 1954 Sub-Committee report,

A breakdown of some of these authors shows that at least 12 have been in the past either identified under oath as having been involved or implicated in Soviet espionage or had acted in some important or confidential capacity in behalf of Soviet Russia: Cedric Belfrage, Haakon Chevalier, Lauchlin Currie, Israel Epstein, Philip Jaffe, Owen Lattimore, Kate Mitchell, Harriet Lucy Moore, Andrew Roth, Agnes Smedley, Guenther Stein, [and] Victor Yakhontoff. The adverse information on the above individuals was not classified or secret but was available to anyone who could read the public press. Most of them had been the subject of extensive reports published by the Senate Internal Security subcommittee or the House Committee on Un-American Activities.⁷

According to Evans,

The committee also provided information on the books themselves, including numerous quotes in lavish praise of Moscow. Following are some examples: **“The Soviet Union plays the role of clearing the path, of facilitating world progress, of proving by its own example the superiority of the socialist system”** (James S. Allen). **“Russia’s strength, to put it in a nutshell, lies in her moral and scientific achievements. Russia has introduced moral principle and scientific method into the heart of productive life. That is the prime cause of her matchless strength”** (Hewlett Johnson). **“The one hopeful light on the horizon [was] the exciting and encouraging conditions in Soviet Russia, where for the first time in history our race problem has been squarely faced and solved”** (Eslanda Robeson)... **These effusive tributes to the Kremlin, to repeat, were taken from books in official U.S. reading rooms, allegedly meant to advance American interests in the Cold War.⁸**

State Department officials began removing the objectionable books, not, however, at the directive of McCarthy, who as a Senator had no direct control over a Cabinet Department of the

⁴ Gerald Sorin. *Howard Fast: Life and Literature in the Left Lane* (Indiana University Press), 270.

<https://goo.gl/VAe8Vc>

⁵ M. Stanton Evans. *Blacklisted by History: The Untold Story of Senator Joe McCarthy and His Fight Against America's Enemies* (Crown Forum; Kindle, November 6, 2007), 9224.

<http://a.co/304HXGC>

⁶ *Ibid*, 9182.

⁷ *Ibid*, 9185.

⁸ *Ibid*, 9194.

Executive branch. During a press conference in July 1953, Eisenhower said that “if USIS [U.S. Information Service] libraries overseas carried books that advocated Communism, such books should be gotten rid of, “because he saw no reason for the Federal government to be supporting something that advocated its own destruction. That seemed to him the acme of silliness.””⁹ To that end Secretary of State John Foster Dulles directed that books by Communist authors be removed from the overseas libraries.

Among the reasons for the prevalence of Communist works in the overseas libraries was that “the book collections, and the people who chose them, were holdovers from the days of OWI [the Office of War Information], among the most heavily penetrated and leftward-tilting federal agencies ever.”¹⁰ For example, Theodore Kaghan, who in 1953 was the acting deputy director of public affairs for the Allied High Commission (basically he was in charge of the U.S. propaganda war against Moscow in West Germany), and by extension was in charge of the State Department libraries in West Germany, had previously worked in the OWI.

Among his ties to Communism, Kaghan had previously signed a nominating petition for a Communist politician, “in the 1930s had also been the roommate and coworker of an identified Communist, worked with a Communist-dominated outfit called the New Theater Project,” and had previously flunked a loyalty-security check.¹¹ Later, while working for the Allied High Commission, Kaghan had directed and sponsored various pro-Soviet initiatives, from print runs of pro-Soviet books, to the sponsorship of pro-Soviet lecturers touring Europe.¹²

Zinn cites no source for the claim that the State Department removed *The Selected Works of Thomas Jefferson* and *The Children’s Hour* from the overseas libraries, and the veracity of that claim is unknown. However, what is known is that the books’ authors, Philip Foner and Lillian Hellman respectively, were long time Communist sympathizers. In the 1940s, Foner had aided in the publication of an official Communist Party newsletter, among other activities, and in 1942 was dismissed from the City College of New York for his affiliation with the Communist Party. This was at a time when the Soviet Union was a military ally and, for that reason, pro-Soviet sentiments were more widely tolerated than would be the case after the war. Lillian Hellman on the other hand, admitted in 1952 to being a member of the Communist Party from 1938-1940 and later in the 1940s had a passport application denied on account being “an active communist.”

While it is unclear how many books were removed from the State Department’s overseas libraries, a number were apparently burned, none however by Sen. Joseph McCarthy.

⁹ Ibid, 9284.

Transcript of Eisenhower Press Conference, *New York Times*, July 2, 1953.

<http://www.nytimes.com/1953/07/02/archives/transcript-of-eisenhower-press-conference-on-foreign-and-domestic.html>

¹⁰ M. Stanton Evans. *Blacklisted by History: The Untold Story of Senator Joe McCarthy and His Fight Against America’s Enemies* (Crown Forum; Kindle, November 6, 2007), 9240.

<http://a.co/304HXGC>

¹¹ Ibid, 9255.

¹² Ibid, 9265.