

# The Party's Public Face

THE AMERICAN COMMUNIST PARTY: A Critical History (1919-1957). By Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, assisted by Julius Jacobson. 593 pp. Boston: Beacon Press. \$6.75.

By HARRY SCHWARTZ

THE great need for a sober, objective and complete history of the Communist party in this country has been matched only by the many difficulties standing in the way of such a work. The Communist party has aroused too many passions among our people, it has surrounded itself with too much secrecy and it is still too much of a political football to make a fully satisfactory and definitive work possible at the present time. There is still public controversy, for example, as to whether what remains of that party is an impotent sect having no importance or is a more dangerous and subtle threat to the republic than ever before.

Against this background, the effort this volume makes to meet part of the need is to be welcomed. Irving Howe and Lewis Coser of Brandeis University are also editors of the independent socialist magazine, *Dissent*. They have used the tools of scholarly research to present what might be called the public history of the Communist party, leaving others to deal with the underground and espionage aspects of the story.

Within their self-defined limits of interest, the authors have been largely successful, and there is no other single volume of comparable merit and scope available. They tell the complicated story of the party and its convolutions in a sprightly manner; they are alert to the basic tragedy of its "profound destructive and corrupting influence upon American radicalism" as well as to its ridiculous and comic aspects. Along with the basic account of the party's subservience to Moscow, they find room for describing the plight of the party faithful as they struggled with the "wife question" as a barrier to recruitment, or discovered that American workers whom they harangued on the evils of the bourgeoisie thought they were talking about burros that kick.

THERE is much frightening material in this book on how successfully and widely the Communists penetrated significant areas of American society during the Popular Front period of the Nineteen Thirties and the wartime Soviet-American alliance. Even for those who, like this reviewer, lived through these periods and were conscious of what was going on, it still comes as a shock to be reminded of what diverse and important groups and individu-

*Mr. Schwartz of The Times editorial board has studied communism root and bough.*



Communism in America: Above, May Day demonstration in front of Philadelphia's City Hall in 1933. Below, office of *The Daily Worker*, New York, shortly before Federal seizure in 1956.



als the Communists were able to utilize for their purposes. In the World War II period, the authors point out, it was primarily American admiration for the Soviet wartime role that permitted this penetration.

In some ways the most interesting portion of the volume is the final, analytical section which formulates a theory of Stalinism: "Communism and its cruel caricature, Stalinism, derived not from a psychological malaise unique to or predominant among its adherents but from a general breakdown of society. \* \* \* In our time, every weakness of society binds certain men to Stalinism because it has discovered the point where those weaknesses cause the most pain."

How did it come about that in this country and elsewhere "Communist parties were transformed from groups of devoted revolutionaries into agencies of a totalitarian state functioning through a skillful appropriation of the revolutionary tradition and vocabulary?" The authors reject many of the usual theories and offer the concept of "relative deprivation" as the cause of Free-World Stalinism. They write: "Stalinism finds its greatest strength not in countries hopelessly sunk in misery but in countries where rapid and bewildering changes of social con-

ditions assault the consciousness of people like a series of brutal shocks." This country, during the depression, certainly fits that description.

The authors raise a controversial point by calling into question the view that the Communist party is a gigantic conspiracy, with most of its members active or potential conspirators." They do not deny the existence of the Soviet spy network, but they question whether the espionage system can be identified with the Stalinist movement, even though it made use of that movement. Their argument here is that most people who joined the Communist party belonged for only a short time and then were so repelled that they quit. In effect, they argue that it is silly to assume that any large number of the 500,000 to 750,000 Americans who have belonged to the party since its formation were or could have been spies. Only the devoted party militants would have been so, they say. In the authors' words, "The status of a 'conspiracy' that is constantly creating masses of ex-conspirators surely would seem problematic." Problematic or not, however, it is on some such notion that our law and practice concerning the Communist party in this past decade have been based.