

# But It Didn't Happen Here

THE DECLINE OF AMERICAN COMMUNISM: A History of the Communist Party of the United States Since 1945. By David A. Shannon. 425 pp. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. \$7.50.

By HARRY SCHWARTZ

ONE of the ironies of the current world situation is the contrast between the present positions of the Soviet Union and of that country's faithful servant here, the Communist party. The Soviet Union is at its historic peak of power and prestige. David A. Shannon estimates in this volume that the Communist party of the United States now has not much more than 3,000 members with an average age so great that "the time may have already come when more Communists die annually than are recruited." Yet it is not much more than a decade ago that the party membership was near the 100,000 mark, when it was an appreciable influence in key areas of American life, and when it was the guiding force behind the Progressive party campaign that brought Henry A. Wallace more than 1,000,000 votes in the 1948 Presidential election.

This volume is the third in the Fund for the Republic series on Communism in American Life. In it the author, who is Associate Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, describes and analyzes the débâcle that overtook the Communist party of the United States between the end of World War II and the present. Combining the tools of the historian who works in the library and the journalist who interviews the living individuals during or immediately after their participation in a historical process, Mr. Shannon has produced a competent and workmanlike volume that is likely to be the standard treatment of this subject for years to come.

WITH the author's general analysis of the causes of the party's decline, there can be little disagreement. Taking its cue from Moscow, the party set itself consistently against the main currents of American public opinion throughout the cold war, exposing itself clearly as the instrumentality of a foreign power time and again—at the time of the Prague coup in February, 1948, during the Korean

war and at each shift in the complex history of Soviet-Yugoslav relations, to mention but three obvious instances. No less important, the party—following Moscow's lead—consistently guessed wrong about what would happen here. The long awaited and hoped-for disastrous post-war capitalist depression never took place; the United States did not go Fascist and its democratic institutions survived even Senator Joseph R. McCarthy; the United States never attacked the Soviet Union; the list of things American Communists expected to happen but which did not actually happen could be long extended.

The other side of the coin (to which Mr. Shannon pays inadequate attention) was the excellence of the operation of the

## Soviet Tool

OF all the generalizations about the Communist Party of the United States and its history that might be made from the evidence, the most important and most nearly universally valid one is this: the American Communist Party was and is the willing instrument of the Soviet Union. The revolution does indeed devour the children it has borne and nursed and never weaned. — "The Decline of American Communism."

present peculiar form of state we call American capitalism, an excellence which undercut the arguments of those who wanted to remold this country in the Soviet image. With relatively minor exceptions, there have been jobs for all here since 1945 and even the unemployed have, in the main, been provided at least a subsistence minimum. With social tensions eased by the favorable job conditions, minorities moved ahead to break down old barriers with varying speed. The most aggrieved large minority, the Negroes, did so with the help of the Supreme Court and of a non-Communist, often religious leadership. If the Okies and Arkies, the unemployed, and the Marxist intellectuals were the symbols of American maladjustment and discontent in the Nineteen Thirties, their nearest analogues in the Nineteen Fifties are the beatniks and the

members of the shook-up generation, neither group much concerned with dialectical materialism or the theory of surplus value. Even a wiser Communist leader than William Z. Foster, we may suspect, would have come a cropper in the face of this (relatively) affluent society.

The author tells, in the most intimate detail this reviewer has yet seen, the full story of how the *coup de grâce* was administered to the party, reducing it to its present status of an impotent sect: the story of Khrushchev's secret speech, of the impact of Poland and Hungary, and of John Gates' foredoomed effort to remake his organization into a truly American "national communist" party independent of Moscow. But the author's own data make clear that most of the job of ending the Communist party as a significant American political force had already been done before these events. Even before Khrushchev delivered his exposé of Stalin, the party had little more than 20,000 members. Its influence in the unions, among the Negroes and in genuine mass organizations was negligible. Its contacts with the real basic trends in American life had become virtually nonexistent.

ON the whole, Mr. Shannon thinks the Communist party here will be, in Trotsky's phrase, "swept into the dust-bin of history." But at one point he warns that a guarantee against the party's revival "cannot be made with assurance." What he has in mind is hinted at when he raises, but does not answer, the question of whether the Soviet or American economy works better in the long run. A reviewer may perhaps guess that the author wonders how long American politics can remain wholly immune to Soviet successes in space, in rapidity of production growth and the like. But rather than the Communists being the beneficiary of these Soviet achievements, the real immediate beneficiary would seem to be that would-be Presidential candidate who manages to out-debate Premier Khrushchev in public and perhaps that one of the two major parties which manages first to present an effective program for really meeting the Soviet challenge.

But in an era when discussion of economic planning for America has become respectable (even the Rockefeller name can be attached to the idea, or some variant of it) one may guess that the American Communists have had their day and any Soviet influences (political or economic) on our society will be transmitted through our two traditional parties—each reacting in its own way to the problem. Such, to conclude where we began, is the irony of history.

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