

A witch hunt: view of mccarthyism assignment

[History](#)



However, in the light of recent evidence presented by John Earl Haynes and Harvey Keller, it appears that the majority of those persecuted were indeed communists, and many had been engaged in espionage for the Soviet Union.

[1] Although such new evidence has exposed the existence of communism and espionage in America during the Cold War, this does not automatically justify McCarthy, and indeed, it will be seen how the movement did reflect some characteristics of a 'witch hunt'.

This essay will seek to examine the characteristics of McCarthy in light of the new evidence. Yet, in the latter part of the essay, the merits of using such terminology to describe the movement will also be addressed, to ascertain whether there can be any utility in asking if McCarthy was essentially a 'witch-hunt'. Although a witch-hunt would suggest that anti-communist persecution in America randomly targeted the innocent, as Haynes and Keller have confirmed, internal communism was not a mere invention, imagined by J. Edgar Hoover or Senator Joe himself.

There would not have been a McCarthy without the existence of the American Communist party, and indeed, most of those convicted or dismissed did have a determinable link to unionism activity. As the Vienna project has confirmed, the presence of Soviet espionage did exist in the 1950s. Alger Hiss, who was accused of being a Soviet spy and sentenced to five years imprisonment, indeed appears highly implicated. Klaus Fuchs provided the Soviets with secrets concerning the atomic bomb, and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed in 1953 for espionage were not innocent.

Many of the alleged spies of the McCarthy era had helped the Soviets and shared secrets. The majority of those persecuted were, or had been members of the American Communist Party and of those victimized few were apolitical. The persecution, rather than sporadic, appears systematic. 'Red hunters' knew exactly where to go, seeking out Left-wing labor leaders, civil rights activists, those who collected money for the Spanish republic, or those otherwise engaged in activities that the CPA promoted. We can see then, that rather than randomly targeting anyone, the persecution of communists largely only entailed persecuting communists.

As 'witch hunt' might suggest, such victims were not wholly innocent of the crimes they were charged with. Yet, although these victims did indeed have communist connections, the perceived threat from communists came not directly from ideology itself, but from the apparent danger to national security that they were seen to pose. Although those persecuted were not innocent of the charge of communism, it can be argued that the majority did not present the massive national security threat that figures such as McCarthy and Hoover charged.

Consequently, it could be conceived that the irrationality and hysteria surrounding such charges provide McCarthy with some key characteristics of a 'witch hunt. Yes, it is clear that some genuinely damaging espionage activity took place. The information provided by Fuchs allowed the Soviets to produce an atomic bomb possibly a few years earlier than would have occurred. The Rosenberg provided the KGB with valuable military information about radar, jet planes and advanced weapon systems.

Nevertheless, it can be asked if this minority of cases was justified to warrant the widespread and systematic persecution of thousands of other, relatively harmless communists in America. Indeed, most of those communists persecuted were not dangerous enough to sectional security to justify the terror witnessed in the McCarthy era. Although many were identified to have shared secrets, it is useful to make a distinction between transmission of sensitive military information and leaking more trivial data to colleagues or journalists.

Many may not have regarded what they were engaged in as 'spying'. Furthermore, much of the alleged 'espionage' that was charged took place during World War II, when the Soviets and the IIS were on the same side. Arguably, this did not represent espionage. As the allies Britain and America often shared information, many unionists may have considered such activity as helping the war effort, or 'diplomacy' rather than a treacherous act. It is nuances such as these which throw the nature of McCarthy into question.

Although the 'witches' existed, most were not dangerous enough to be victimized, ergo giving McCarthy an irrational quality that rings of a 'witch hunt'. This intolerance, and inability of those engaging in anti-communist activity to distinguish between dangerous and innocuous forms of communists is evidence of the irrational, hysterical undercurrent of the McCarthy era that rivalries the justifications of the tyranny that took place. Manifesting during the Cold War, McCarthy can be viewed as a manifestation of the insecurity that America faced during the crisis. Losing' China to Mayo's revolution, and the onset of the Korean war entailed that communists, a common escape goat in US history were blamed. However, rather than a <https://assignbuster.com/a-witch-hunt-view-of-mccarthyism-assignment/>

general intolerance for the ideology of communism, with the Cold War, the perception of communists morphed from inconvenience in society to threat, triggering a hysterical and intolerant repression of anyone even slightly to the Left of the spectrum. The press helped to bolster this feeling, demoralizing communists and exacerbating the notion the communist instantly equated with threat.

The irrational and pervasive nature of this apparent threat is evident in the vague reasons given by many of those who 'saw red' at the time. For example, when asked why an alleged communist had aroused suspicion, vague answers, such as 'he was not like us' or 'I just knew' were common.

[2] Seemingly trivial reasons, such as appearing brighter could bring an accusation. As Roosevelt secretary of labor Frances Perkins remarked, they had 'fancy ideas... Ere brighter than we were and could think quicker'. 3]

The element of fear brought by the Cold War fostered an insecure irrationality, conceiving America as weaker and Soviet influence as stronger than was necessarily true. As a result, it could be viewed that although not misidentified, the visitation and oppression of communists during 1 sass and 1 sass America was irrational, obsessive and hysterical. Although, as Haynes and Keller have found, communists existed. Yet, the threat that the majority truly proposed was overemphasized and their persecution therefore unnecessary. The comparisons to a witch-hunt then, seem indeed compelling.

However, in attempting to understand the phenomenon of McCarthy, using the benefit of hindsight seems to have little utility. Although now, the actual threat of internal, subversive, Soviet influenced communists seems to have <https://assignbuster.com/a-witch-hunt-view-of-mccarthyism-assignment/>

been minimal and McCarthy irrational, at the time, the threat was indeed perceived to be very real. The arguments then, regarding the justification of McCarthy should transcend identifications of ' guilty' or ' innocent.

Persecutions and fear of an internal communist threat were very sectional to those who experienced it, seeming justified at the time.

The merit then, rather than determining the need for persecution of communists, lies in understanding the contemporary rationale behind it, and asking why the threat of communism came to be so pervasive. Rather than asking if there was a threat, perhaps it would be more appropriate to examine if there seemed to be a justification in perceiving a threat at the time. For instance, McCarthy does not merely represent the accusations from the Senator of the same name, but the anti-communist movement that began prior to his rise to fame.

McCarthy was not just being advocated by McCarthy, but implemented previously from the top- down, advocated by top government officials such as Edgar Hoover. For example, in 1938, the House committee on Un-American activities (HUGH) began to investigate Left wingers. In 1940, Congress approved the Smith Act, making it criminal for anyone to teach, advocate or encourage the overthrow of the government by force. Hoover confirmed the presence of an enormous fifth column, asserting that there were half a million communists and fellow travelers in the US.] Whilst McCarthy did not represent the most reliable figure, anti-communist action and pronouncements emanating from Congress, the president and other areas of government existed. It would seem then, that rather than originating in the form of grass roots hysteria or the accusations of Joe <https://assignbuster.com/a-witch-hunt-view-of-mccarthyism-assignment/>

McCarthy, McCarthy represented something very real, legitimated by the government and encouraging popular distrust of communists. It does not seem irrational then, to believe what appeared to be a consensus, advocated by the government.

Furthermore, as discussed, McCarthy represented a 'home front' during the Cold War, which provided further legitimating for the perceived threat. The threat of communism had been a feature in American society since the 19th century, fluctuating from the first 'red scare' of 1919/20 and throughout the sass. However, although an internal communist threat had been perceived, McCarthy persecution did not occur before the Cold War, as this would have represented an irrational reaction.

The Cold War however, bore an actual, dangerous threat from the Soviet Union, cataloging the perceived threat of communism globally, and domestically. As the threat of communism grew, it would seem natural that anti-communism at home would parallel that abroad, diminishing the apparent irrationality of McCarthy sentiments. The domestic anti-communism of the Cold War also had a class basis, once again, appearing rational to those it affected. With the end of WWI, booming prosperity and increased social mobility benefited many in society.

Yet, with the increased perception of communist influence in America, many feared for their private property, and wealth that capitalism had brought. The fear of a communist takeover in the US, although now seemingly irrational contributed towards this. The weakness of America in the face of communists began to seem real, and was corroborated with historical

evidence. For instance, there were allegedly more communists in America than had been involved in the Bolshevik revolution, fueling the fear that revolution might have been imminent.

If we are to add to these concerns the barrage of instances of supposed communist subversion, espionage and sabotage in the McCarthy era, the threat to national security indeed seems more plausible and rational than it may do with hindsight. In conclusion, despite evidence of the real existence of communist spies in Cold War America, it seems that the true threat posed to American society was minimal, and at very least, did not warrant the extensive tyranny and oppression of communists that in this light is comparable to a 'witch hunt'.