

# Account of McCarthy period slanders socialist opponents of Stalinism

## Review of Ellen Schrecker's *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America*

**Shannon Jones**  
**24 March 1999**

Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America by Ellen Schrecker, Little, Brown and Company, 1998, 573 pages

Much has been written about the terrible impact of the McCarthyite witch-hunts of the late 1940s and 1950s on American cultural and political life--the blacklisting of actors and writers, the purging of militants from the unions, the stifling of critical thought. It was a period of unrelenting reaction, hundreds were jailed, thousands more deprived of their jobs and livelihoods because of their political beliefs. No area of creative endeavor escaped its impact.

The scars of McCarthyism are still everywhere evident--the notoriously docile and subservient American trade union movement; the banal and commercialized Hollywood television and movie industry; the stultified and conformist state of academia. In no major industrial country in the world is intellectual and cultural life so constricted.

Given the advanced decay of American liberalism, as manifested in the crisis of the Clinton administration and the growing influence at the highest levels of extreme right-wing and outright fascistic forces in the United States, a historical review of the origins and impact of McCarthyism is of the utmost timeliness.

Any serious assessment of McCarthyism must consider fore and center the criminal role played by the Stalinist Communist Party, which, by associating socialism with terrible crimes against the working class, helped create the political climate in which red-baiting could flourish. Long before Wisconsin Senator Joe McCarthy arrived on the scene, the American Communist Party had earned well-deserved hostility throughout the working class for its treacherous and deceitful politics and its ready use of physical violence against opponents.

*Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America*, published last year by historian Ellen Schrecker, attempts a new examination of the McCarthy period. While there is important material detailing the impact of McCarthyism on the American left, Schrecker's book distinguishes itself principally by its apologetic attitude toward Stalinism.

Schrecker, a professor of history at Yeshiva University, spent more than 20 years studying the McCarthy period. Her previous works on the subject include *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* and *The Age of McCarthyism*. Schrecker's latest book gives a detailed account of the impact of McCarthyism on a wide range of American life. It follows the lives of several McCarthyite victims to illustrate the utter viciousness of the red-baiting campaign.

Parts of the book are informative. *Many are the Crimes* documents the sinister role of the FBI in subverting civil liberties. It follows the attempt by the government, backed by the AFL-CIO, to destroy left-wing unions such as the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers and

the Maritime Cooks and Stewards Union.

Schrecker gives an account of the attempts to stop the production and distribution of the film, *Salt of the Earth*, an account of a strike by members of the Mine Mill union against Empire Zinc in New Mexico. The project, an effort by blacklisted Hollywood screenwriters, actors and technicians, encountered ferocious resistance, including attacks by a vigilante mob and the refusal of technicians to process and edit the film.

However, the work's positive material is more than outweighed by the distortion introduced by the author's sympathy for Stalinism. Particularly foul is the thesis advanced by Schrecker that the socialist opponents of Stalinism, in the first place Leon Trotsky and his supporters, were part and parcel of the McCarthyite attack on democratic rights. In the introduction Schrecker asserts there were, "many McCarthyisms, each with its own agenda and modus operandi." She continues, "there was even a left wing version composed of left wing radicals who attacked Communists as traitors to socialist ideals."

The assertion that there were "many McCarthyisms" is worthless as a basis for analysis because it makes no distinction between antagonistic political tendencies whose hostility to Stalinism was based on opposed principles. The American Trotskyists, at that time represented by the Socialist Workers Party, opposed the CP on an anti-capitalist basis, citing its crimes against the interests of the working class. In contrast, the McCarthyite red-baiters and their liberal allies denounced the CP for allegedly trying to foment a revolution in the US, a fantastic and absurd charge based partly on ignorance and partly on conscious deception.

In an article entitled *American Stalinism and Anti-Stalinism*, published in 1947 as the witch-hunting heated up, US Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon explained his organization's independent position. "We Trotskyists, as everybody knows, are also against Stalinism and have fought it unceasingly and consistently for a very long time. But we have no place in the present 'all-inclusive' united front against American Stalinism. The reason for this is that we are anti-capitalist. Consequently, we can find no point of agreement with the campaign conducted by the political representatives of American capitalism in Washington, with the support of its agents in the labor movement and its lackeys in the literary and academic world. We fight Stalinism from a different standpoint.

"We fight Stalinism, not because it is another name for communism, but precisely because of its betrayal of communism and of the interests of the workers in the class struggle. Our exposition of the question is made from a communist point of view, and our appeal is directed not to the exploiters of labor and their various reactionary agencies of oppression and deception, but to the workers, who have a vital interest in the struggle against the capitalist exploiters as well as against perfidious Stalinism" (

*The Struggle for Socialism in the American Century*, James P. Cannon *Writings and Speeches 1945-47*, New York, Pathfinder, 1977, p. 353).

In line with her attack on the left-wing opponents of Stalinism, Schrecker obscures the central role played by the American CP in preparing the ground for McCarthyism. The CP was not a well-intentioned, albeit flawed, revolutionary party, as suggested by Schrecker, but a counterrevolutionary movement, whose crimes against the interests of the working class generated widespread antipathy that was exploited successfully by demagogues such as the Senator from Wisconsin.

Schrecker deals in a cursory manner with the support given by the American CP to the mass arrests and executions carried out by the Soviet bureaucracy. Of the attitude of the US Stalinists to the purges she says, "At the time, the American CP seemed to condone it all."

The record speaks for itself. The American CP vociferously defended the Moscow trials and the murder of the entire generation of socialists that led the Russian Revolution. Not only that, American Stalinism provided personnel for bloody crimes, including the assassination of Leon Trotsky in Coyoacan, Mexico in 1940 (not mentioned by Schrecker) and other left-wing figures such as anarchist leader Carlo Tresca, who was gunned down in New York in 1943. Within those unions which it dominated, the American CP was notorious for the use of goon squad violence against opponents.

Just two paragraphs of *Many are the Crimes* are devoted to the Smith Act trial of 1941, which set a crucial precedent for the later development of McCarthyism. In the trial, the leadership of the Socialist Workers Party was charged with conspiring to overthrow the government. The attack on the SWP took place against a background of US preparations to enter WWII. The US government singled out the Trotskyists because they were the only movement that sought to mobilize the working class against the war.

Among the "evidence" brought against the SWP were the writings of Lenin and Trotsky as well as basic writings of Karl Marx, such as the Communist Manifesto. While the jury acquitted all the defendants on charges of conspiracy, 18 were convicted and sentenced to prison for advocating the overthrow of the government.

In regard to the attitude of the CP leadership at the time Schrecker merely says, "Their wartime loyalty to FDR and hostility to Trotskyism kept them from speaking out against the Minneapolis prosecution."

In reality the American Communist Party enthusiastically supported the prosecution of the SWP leaders, supplied evidence to the prosecution and intervened to block unions from raising money to support the defendants. With the invasion by Hitler of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 the American CP adopted a position of uncritical support for US entry into the war. Echoing Stalin's charges in the Moscow Trials, they claimed the American Trotskyists were in alliance with Hitler.

During the years of the US-Soviet alliance against Nazi Germany the American CP was the most enthusiastic defender of the no-strike pledge. It encouraged speedup and opposed attempts by workers to fight for higher pay to meet the cost of wartime inflation. During the 1943 coal strikes the CP called for the arrest and execution of United Mine Workers President John L. Lewis on charges of treason.

On page 81 of *Many are the Crimes* the author levels a serious and utterly false charge against Trotsky. After pointing out that revulsion with Stalinism led some formerly radical intellectuals to move in the direction of anticommunism, she suggests that Trotsky was following the same trajectory. Schrecker writes, "In October 1939, Trotsky apparently accepted an invitation to testify before HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee], but had to postpone his appearance because of the State Department's refusal to give him a visa. He was about to give a deposition to a member of the HUAC staff when he was assassinated. One wonders what the old revolutionary would have said; it is even more interesting to speculate what would have been done with his statement."

The decision by HUAC, then popularly known as the Dies Committee after its chairman, Representative Martin Dies of Texas, to invite Trotsky's testimony had been prompted by the American Communist Party. In previous testimony before HUAC, CP leaders had claimed that Trotsky was an agent of Hitler.

Trotsky accepted the invitation to testify, not out of a desire to aid the red-baiters, as Schrecker suggests, but in order to educate the working class about the nature of genuine communism as opposed to Stalinism. Explaining that the invitation represented an opportunity to elucidate his political ideas, Trotsky wrote that workers "would joyfully welcome every bold revolutionary word thrown in the very face of the class enemy. And the more reactionary the institution that serves as the arena for the combat, all the more complete is the satisfaction of the worker" ( *In Defense of Marxism*, Leon Trotsky, New Park, 1971, p. 109).

A major consideration by Trotsky was his desire to expose the Moscow Trials, where he was the chief defendant and had been sentenced to death in absentia. Trotsky's attempt to expose the frame-up trials had been all but silenced by the world press.

A less tendentious historian would have noted that the ranks of the American CP itself supplied the largest portion of the stool pigeons of the McCarthy period. As Cannon aptly noted, "Never in history has any radical organization yielded up so many informers, eager to testify against it" ( *James P. Cannon, Speeches to the Party*, Pathfinder, 1973, p. 130). The list of CP renegades is long, including notorious finks such as Whittaker Chambers and former *Daily Worker* editor Louis Budenz. Within the unions not a few formerly pro-Stalinist bureaucrats such as Joseph Curran of the seamen and Michael Quinn of the transport workers changed colors and joined the red-baiters. There were not a few ex-CP members who turned informer in Hollywood, including film director Elia Kazan, the center of the recent controversy around the Oscar awards.

It should be noted that Schrecker recently defended the decision of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to honor Kazan with a "lifetime achievement" award. Denying the obvious fact that the award is widely seen as a slap in the face to the victims of the McCarthy witch-hunts in Hollywood, she claimed Kazan was being recognized solely for artistic accomplishment.

Of course the wretched role of Stalinism does not justify or excuse those liberals, ex-socialists and ex-radicals who went over to anticommunism. The participation of wide layers of American radicals and liberals, first in the defense of the Moscow Trials and later in the McCarthy era persecutions, was a sorry and shameful chapter. While intellectual and moral cowardice certainly played a large role, in the last analysis its origins lay in the identification of Stalinism with Marxism.

This radically false view underlies Schrecker's analysis. While apparently advancing diametrically opposed positions, her pro-Stalinist outlook and the school of anticommunism share a common premise--the claim that the Soviet regime as it developed under Stalin was the embodiment of Marxist principles.

This is not the failure of Schrecker alone, but that of several generations of American "left" intellectuals, who have never come to grips with the nature of Stalinism. In hundreds of so-called scholarly critiques of the Soviet Union and its demise almost nothing of any substance has been said of the prescient analyses made by Trotsky of the nature of Stalin's Russia.

*Many are the Crimes* concludes by listing a series of manifestations of intellectual stultification, which, it is asserted, represent the lingering impact of McCarthyism. However, insofar as Schrecker bases her arguments on the long discredited lies and falsifications of Stalinism, her work not only does not contribute to clearing the air, it adds to the odor.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**