

The FBI and Albert Einstein

The Einstein File: J. Edgar Hoover's Secret War Against the World's Most Famous Scientist, by Fred Jerome. St. Martin's Press, 2002. 348 pages. ISBN 0-312-28856-5

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A 22-year campaign of spying and slander by the FBI against Albert Einstein is traced in this recently published book.

That the FBI spied on prominent personalities, including artists, musicians, scientists and scholars, has been well known for decades. The FBI file on Einstein, perhaps the greatest scientist of the 20th century, first came to light in 1983, when Robert Alan Schwartz, a professor at Florida International University, wrote an article on the subject for *The Nation* magazine.

Up to 25 percent of the Einstein file was originally blacked out or withheld by the authorities. Author Fred Jerome sued under the Freedom of Information Act and successfully obtained most of the remaining material. The result is a much more detailed examination of the 1,800-page dossier compiled in the decades-long campaign against Einstein.

This book is well worth a full reading. In its own examination of Einstein's activities, *The Einstein File* reveals to a wider audience what has remained little known in the decades since Einstein's death: the Nobel Prize-winning physicist, whose *Theories of Special and General Relativity* changed the world and whose name became synonymous with scientific genius, was deeply committed to the fight against war and for democratic rights and civil liberties. He was also an outspoken opponent of social inequality and an advocate of a socialist planned economy.

The Einstein dossier serves as a useful reminder of the scope of FBI spying. Pious and complacent liberals often remark on the "excesses" of the McCarthy era. As the campaign against Einstein shows, these methods long predated the Cold War and McCarthy, although they reached a frenzied pitch in the early 1950s.

Long before the Cold War and the Smith Act prosecutions of the leaders of the Communist Party, the mere expression of socialist or radical views by a prominent figure was considered sufficient basis for an FBI investigation. The techniques employed against Einstein—illegally opening his mail, monitoring his phone calls and compiling a detailed record of his political views and activities for the purpose of criminalizing them—were standard operating procedure.

Subsequent history has also shown that the FBI's attacks on democratic rights didn't stop with McCarthy's downfall, nor with the demise of the notorious J. Edgar Hoover, who ruled over the agency for nearly 50 years until his death in 1972.

The official campaign against Einstein began even before he settled in the US as a refugee from Hitler in 1933. When he applied for a visa in 1932 to teach at a university in California, as he had done on several previous occasions, an extreme right-wing outfit called the Woman Patriot Corporation sent a 16-page letter to the State Department arguing that he should not be allowed into the country. According to this group,

Einstein's well known anti-war and internationalist views amounted to "direct affiliation with Communist and anarcho-communist organizations and groups..."

The State Department, having received this missive, proceeded to interrogate Einstein at the US Consulate in Berlin about his political views. According to an Associated Press report at the time: "Professor Einstein's patience broke. His usual genial face stern and his normally melodious voice strident, he cried: 'What's this, an inquisition? Is this an attempt at chicanery? I don't propose to answer such silly questions. I didn't ask to go to America. Your countrymen invited me; yes, begged me. If I am to enter your country as a suspect, I don't want to go at all. If you don't want to give me a visa, please say so. Then I'll know where I stand.'"

Within hours of the press being notified of this incident, the State Department announced that a visa for Einstein and his wife would be issued the next day. On December 10, 1932 he set sail for the US, arriving on January 12, 1933. A little more than two weeks later, Adolf Hitler took power in Germany, and the Einsteins' stay in America became a permanent one.

The quick official climb-down was not the end of the surveillance and harassment, however, but only the beginning. The Woman Patriot Corporation's attack became the beginning of the Einstein file. In the 1930s the FBI added to it from time to time, mostly with clippings and reports noting such matters as Einstein's support for the Loyalist Spanish government in the Civil War against the Franco fascists. During this period Einstein tried, with limited success, to gain entry into the US for fellow refugees from the Nazi regime.

The next major component of the dossier deals with the launching of what would become the Manhattan Project, the race to develop a nuclear weapon before the Nazis. Einstein, although a lifelong pacifist, wrote to then-President Roosevelt suggesting work on such a weapon before the Hitler regime obtained one. When Einstein's name was suggested to assist in this work, Army Intelligence asked the FBI for its opinion.

The FBI file on Einstein was not yet very substantial, but J. Edgar Hoover supplied a cover letter and a "Biographical Sketch" complete with lies and half-truths, including statements that Einstein "has been sponsoring the principal Communist causes in the United States" and that, "in Berlin, even in the political free and easy period of 1923 to 1929, the Einstein home was known as a Communist center and clearing house..."

The FBI concluded: "In view of his radical background, this office would not recommend the employment of Dr. Einstein on matters of a secret nature, without a very careful investigation, as it seems unlikely that a man of his background could, in such a short time, become a loyal American citizen."

After the Second World War and with the onset of the Cold War, the surveillance of Einstein intensified. The FBI noted Einstein's fervent opposition to the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In May 1946, Einstein agreed to lead the newly formed Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists, which campaigned against nuclear weapons development. According to the FBI dossier: "Leader and chief spokesman [for ECAS] was Professor Albert Einstein, who in the past has been used by various Communist Front organizations as a 'big name' 'innocent' sponsor."

Einstein was increasingly out of step with official politics during the Cold War. He defended the Communist Party leaders when they were indicted under the Smith Act in 1948. He came to the aid of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, convicted as Soviet spies and executed in June, 1953. When Einstein sent a private letter appealing for clemency to Irving R. Kaufman, the federal judge who had sentenced the Rosenbergs to die in the electric chair, Kaufman promptly sent the letter on to J. Edgar Hoover, who added it to the Einstein file.

The campaign against Einstein reached its climax between 1950 and 1954. Jerome reports that Hoover's effort to defame and undermine the popularity of the scientist was apparently triggered by a guest appearance by Einstein on the premiere of a weekly television show hosted by Eleanor Roosevelt. The date was February 12, 1950. Two weeks earlier President Harry Truman had announced a crash program to build a hydrogen bomb. Einstein declared his opposition on national television. The *Washington Post* reported in its headline the next morning: "Einstein Fears Hydrogen Bomb Might Annihilate 'Any Life.'"

The very same day, Hoover ordered his chief of domestic intelligence to prepare a full report on Einstein, a report that was hastily drawn up and delivered two days later.

The political witch-hunt and hysteria over Soviet spies were about to move into high gear. Only a week earlier, Joseph McCarthy, in one of his more famous speeches, had told an audience in Wheeling, West Virginia, "I have here in my hand a list of 205 that were known to the secretary of state as being members of the Communist Party and who, nevertheless, are still working and shaping the policy of the State Department." That same week Klaus Fuchs was arrested in London and confessed to spying for the USSR. The ensuing months saw the arrests of others, most prominently, the Rosenbergs.

As far as the FBI was concerned, Einstein's opposition to Washington's campaign against the Soviet Union was an open expression of disloyalty, tantamount to giving aid and comfort to the enemy. Some evidence had to be found linking him to espionage.

No lead was too bizarre to ignore in the four-year vendetta that followed. The FBI interviewed individuals, soon found to be former mental patients, who made bizarre claims. One source confided that Einstein had invented an electric robot that could control the human mind. Enormous time and effort were expended looking for evidence to buttress the fictitious story that one of Einstein's sons was being held hostage in the USSR, supposedly an additional motive for him to be aiding Moscow. Information from pro-Nazi sources was duly incorporated into Einstein's dossier.

While the FBI proceeded with its probe, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was carrying out a parallel investigation aimed at taking away Einstein's status as a naturalized US citizen and deporting him. An INS memo to J. Edgar Hoover on March 8, 1950, only weeks after Hoover had launched his own effort, asked the FBI to furnish "any derogatory information contained in any file" on Einstein. In a follow-up, the INS stated, "...this naturalized person, notwithstanding his world-wide reputation as a scientist, may properly be investigated for possible revocation of naturalization." A five-year investigation of Einstein followed.

Einstein was not simply the passive victim of the defamation campaign.

Even though it was conducted in utmost secrecy, precisely because the authorities feared the backlash if it became publicly known, Einstein was well aware that he was under constant surveillance. At a dinner party in 1948, he told the Polish Ambassador to the US, "I suppose you must realize by now that the US is no longer a free country, that undoubtedly our conversation is being recorded. The room is wired, and my house is closely watched." The presence of this conversation in the Einstein dossier confirms the warning.

Despite serious illness and advancing age, Einstein spoke out in defense of democratic principles until the day he died. It is no exaggeration to say that on many occasions he filled a vacuum created by the silence of so many other prominent intellectuals. One of the best examples of this was the letter he wrote to Brooklyn teacher William Frauenglass in May 1953. Frauenglass had been subpoenaed to testify by the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, one of the congressional witch-hunting committees then active.

In response to Frauenglass's request for advice and support, Einstein, then 74 years old, sent a letter that they agreed to send to the *New York Times*, where it was published on June 12. It appeared as part of a front-page story, headlined "'Refuse to Testify,' Einstein Advises Intellectuals Called in by Congress." The editors of the *Times* labeled this call for defiance "illegal", "unnatural" and "unwise."

The popular image of Einstein, cultivated by the media and by and large accepted by his many biographers, is that of the brilliant but somewhat absent-minded scientist, a man at home in the realm of theoretical physics but not in the everyday world. He has been turned into an icon and placed on a pedestal that allows his political views to be safely hidden away. When *Time* magazine chose him as "Person of the Century" several years ago, it omitted all mention of his socialist views.

The popular image is false. Einstein was steeped in German and European culture. Born in 1879, he grew up in the country that was the home of the mass socialist workers' movement founded by Marx and Engels, and although he did not fully embrace Marxism, he was deeply influenced by it. From his teenage years Einstein manifested the internationalism and humanism that would characterize his entire life.

In 1895 he left Germany to study and work in Switzerland, where he did his early famous work on relativity. He returned to Germany in 1914, only months before the beginning of the First World War. At a time when German Social Democracy and the overwhelming majority of the intelligentsia succumbed to chauvinism, Einstein was one of a handful of intellectuals who opposed the war, although from a pacifist and not a Marxist standpoint.

Einstein was a lifelong opponent of ignorance and obscurantism, and especially of all forms of chauvinism and racism. During the 1930s, as a newly-arrived immigrant to the US, he came to the defense of the Scottsboro Boys, the nine victims of a racist frame-up in Alabama. In 1946, when the end of World War II was followed by an orgy of racist atrocities including lynchings, he joined with Paul Robeson to form the American Crusade Against Lynching, which sponsored a protest in Washington.

Although he was a longtime Zionist, Einstein also stated (in 1938), that he "should much rather see a reasonable agreement with the Arabs based on living together in peace than the creation of a Jewish state."

Einstein's defense of the Communist Party did not imply support on his part for Stalinism. He was critical of Stalinist attacks on democratic rights, but he opposed the slander that the American Communist Party was simply an instrument of Moscow and that its members had no right to free expression and association. Einstein's position is worth noting today, after the collapse of Stalinism, as a whole school of capitalist apologists seek to use Moscow's crimes to deny the historical significance of the struggle for socialism in the US as well as internationally.

While there is no indication that Einstein concerned himself with the

historical issues raised by the degeneration of the Russian Revolution and Leon Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism, he did consider himself a socialist. This is demonstrated by an article he wrote in 1949 for a newly created magazine, *Monthly Review*. The article, entitled "Why Socialism?", is worth quoting in some detail:

"The economic anarchy of capitalist society as it exists today is, in my opinion, the real source of the evil...

"...I shall call 'workers' all those who do not share in the ownership of the means of production... In so far as the labor contract is 'free,' what the worker receives is determined not by the real value of the goods he produces, but by his minimum needs and by the capitalists' requirement for labor power in relation to the number of workers competing for jobs.

"...under existing conditions, private capitalists inevitably control, directly or indirectly, the main sources of information (press, radio, education). It is thus extremely difficult, and indeed in most cases quite impossible, for the individual citizen to come to objective conclusions and to make intelligent use of his political rights.

"Production is carried on for profit, not for use. There is no provision that all those able and willing to work will always be in a position to find employment; an 'army of unemployed' almost always exists...

"This crippling of individuals I consider the worst evil of capitalism... An exaggerated competitive attitude is inculcated into the student, who is trained to worship acquisitive success...

"I am convinced there is only *one* [italics in original] way to eliminate these grave evils, namely through the establishment of a socialist economy, accompanied by an educational system which would be oriented toward social goals. In such an economy, the means of production are owned by society itself and are utilized in a planned fashion. A planned economy, which adjusts production to the needs of the community, would distribute the work to be done among all those able to work and would guarantee a livelihood to every man, woman and child. The education of the individual, in addition to promoting his own innate abilities, would attempt to develop in him a sense of responsibility for his fellow-men in place of the glorification of power and success in our present society."

By 1954, the FBI's campaign against Einstein had begun running out of steam. Shifting political winds, including the Senate's censure of McCarthy, contributed to the climate in which the investigation began to wind down. It was not closed, however, until several days after Einstein's death on April 18, 1955, at the age of 76.

The attack on Einstein was only one of many similar investigations. It is no exaggeration to say that the FBI gathered information on a majority of the most important American intellectuals at one point or another during this period.

This is a reflection of the backwardness of the American ruling elite, its reliance on anti-intellectual prejudice, and its fear of the impact of political ideas and political education on the broad masses of the American population. Einstein's prominence, popularity and political awareness made him all the more of a threat to the authorities as they sought to stifle opposition to Cold War policies.

The events of the past year show the timeliness of this exposure of the work of the FBI and other intelligence agencies. History has demonstrated the very narrow limits of bourgeois democracy, the political framework through which American capitalism has traditionally ruled. It is not the same thing as the basic democratic rights that have been won through struggle, and must be continuously defended.

It is precisely when the ruling elite feels itself threatened by economic and political crisis that it demonstrates the limits of its "democracy." From the Palmer Raids against immigrant workers and left-wing militants in 1920, to the arrest and conviction of leaders of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party in 1941, to the McCarthy witch-hunts and the current dragnet against Middle Eastern immigrants and the creation of the

Department of Homeland Security, the government has used the specter of external threats to clamp down on opposition at home.



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