

Lecture to the 2025 SEP Summer School

Joseph Hansen—the FBI’s asset in the SWP

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This lecture will deal with relatively new material which has been published regarding FBI investigation and infiltration of the SWP, and the additional light it shines on the findings of Security and the Fourth International. Specifically: Donna Haverty-Stacke’s *Trotskyists on Trial: Free Speech and Political Persecution Since the Age of FDR*, which was published in 2016 and which informed and was expanded upon by Eric London’s 2016 essay, “The Smith Act trial and government infiltration of the Trotskyist movement”—the first chapter of the book *Agents*.

The Smith Act Trial

The central political event in this lecture is the 1941 “Minneapolis” or “Smith Act Trial” of members of the Socialist Workers Party. The Smith Act itself was enacted in June 1940 and made it illegal to advocate the forcible overthrow of the United States government—punishable by a jail sentence of up to 20 years. It was, significantly given the events of today, coupled with a sweeping attack on migrants—its official title was the Alien Registration Act. As Eric explains in his essay:

Its sections relating to immigration required the immediate registration of 5 million immigrants, 900,000 of whom were soon after categorized as “enemy aliens” subject to internment and/or immediate deportation. This same law used to target socialists and communists was also used to intern 120,000 Japanese-Americans on the West Coast during the war.

This attack followed in the footsteps of the laws implemented during the Red Scare which immediately followed the Russian Revolution and was animated by the same concerns, amplified by the rising social and geopolitical tensions of the time. A quote from the *New York Times*, which you can find on the Wikipedia page for the Smith Act, is very revealing, and again has considerable resonance with our own times:

The Alien Registration Act was merely one of many laws hastily passed in the first spasm of fear engendered by the success of fifth columns in less fortunate countries. Suddenly the European war seemed almost at our doors, and who could tell what secret agents were already at work in America?

A year after the law was passed, 29 members of the Socialist Workers Party were charged, breaking down into a group of the party’s national

leaders based in the SWP’s headquarters in New York City, and a group of SWP members in Minneapolis, Minnesota who occupied positions of leadership in the region’s Teamster’s union, Local 544—many of whom had personally led the victorious 1934 general truckers’ strike and fought to recruit 200,000 members to the union across the Midwestern states.

The two charges brought against them were “unlawful conspiracy from and before July 18, 1938 to date of the indictment [June 23, 1941] ... to destroy by force the government of the United States” and that the defendants “advised insubordination in the armed forces with intent and distributed literature to the same effect,” and “knowingly and willfully would, and they did, advocate, abet, advise and teach the duty, necessity, desirability and propriety of overthrowing and destroying the government of the United States by force and violence.”

Making such a high-profile move against the American Trotskyists under this legislation was a highly politically conscious act on the part of the Roosevelt administration and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. The decision to prosecute came one day after the German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, which prompted the Communist Party of the USA to swing 180 degrees to a position of full support for US intervention. As Eric writes,

With the CPUSA reversing its previous stance to become a pro-war party, the SWP became the most significant socialist anti-war party in the United States. The Roosevelt administration was concerned that the movement’s principled opposition to imperialist war would make it a pole of attraction for anti-war sentiment in the American working class.

Significantly on this score, Hoover sent a letter to the Assistant Attorney General after the Smith Act Trial, in 1943, drawing his attention to a picket organised by the SWP of a showing of the pro-Stalinist propaganda film *Mission to Moscow* in Times Square. The CPUSA, of course, enthusiastically backed, with all the lies and viciousness of the Moscow Trials, the prosecution of the SWP’s members, whom they called a “fascist fifth column.”

Of special concern to the US government were the SWP’s proletarian military policy and the proposal for a Union Defense Guard.

Comrades know the proletarian military policy was developed out of a series of discussions with the SWP leadership led by Trotsky in the final months of his life; it was aimed at developing a series of transitional demands through which the SWP could cut a path to the working class, and develop its independence from the bourgeoisie, under conditions of a mass mobilisation for war.

The proposal for a Union Defense Guard was initiated, again by Trotsky, for the purposes of defending workers and socialists from attacks by fascist paramilitary organizations. You can find Cannon’s elaboration

of both in the record of the court proceedings *Socialism on Trial*.

The crucial point to understand is the centrality of the figure of Leon Trotsky, not only in a general political sense, but to the *specific* claims of conspiracy that the US government was trying to prove. In the prosecution's case, Trotsky was the architect, the "ideas man" if you like, behind the plot to overthrow the US government; and his residence in Coyoacan was an organising centre. Trotsky himself was actually listed as a co-conspirator by the grand jury which brought the indictment, despite having been murdered a year earlier.

In their opening arguments at trial, US attorneys declared that the SWP was, and forgave the tortured language:

an instrumentality framed by a man who departed this life in August 1940, by the name of Leon Trotsky, who at the time of his departure, I believe, was in exile in the Republic of Mexico, and that this party was the Trotsky Party, or the party was dedicated to carry into effect the ideas and the plans and the views of Leon Trotsky...

[T]he defendants, or a large number of them, with the knowledge of all these defendants here on trial, made trips to Leon Trotsky in Mexico for the purpose of receiving his counsel and guidance and direction from time to time... contributing to Leon Trotsky and his activities while he was at the outskirts of Mexico City, in Mexico, until the time of his assassination...

[T]hese ideas of Leon Trotsky's are the ideas of the Socialist Workers Party, and so far as the evidence in this case will show, the affirmative and positive ideas of all the defendants upon trial.

Now if you imagine you're prosecuting this case, and there is an individual who is now in the United States, in the leadership of the SWP, and who served not only as a member of Trotsky's guard but as Trotsky's personal secretary for three years, then that individual is clearly going to be vital to your case. You are going to want to question them on the nature of their conversations with Trotsky, on the correspondence they oversaw, on the visitors from the United States that Trotsky received.

Well, that individual existed, and his name was Joseph Hansen. And yet, not only was Hansen not indicted with other members of the SWP under the Smith Act, he was not even subpoenaed.

At particular points in the trial, his absence from the list of defendants was quite glaring. As Eric notes, "In the course of his argument, US Attorney Anderson asserted defendant Albert Goldman's guilt on the grounds that 'he was a member of the Editorial Board of the *Fourth International* [Magazine], with James P. Cannon, with Felix Morrow, with Joe Hansen—Secretary for Leon Trotsky—and others...'" And there is some significance, again as Eric points out, that the familiar name "Joe", by which he was not known publicly through the party press, is used in Hansen's case.

To underscore this point: among the pieces of evidence put forward by the prosecution to establish their allegations of a conspiracy were:

- A March 1939 photograph showing James Bartlett, defendant Harry DeBoer and their wives posing with Trotsky in Mexico.
- Testimony that defendant Farrell Dobbs told Minneapolis SWP members in early 1938 that guards were needed to defend Trotsky in Mexico City, and the Dobbs had visited Trotsky in Mexico City.
- And a reference in Cannon's memorial address after Trotsky's assassination in which he notes visiting Mexico to help strengthen Trotsky's guard.

If that was the bar for attracting the interests of the American government, then Hansen's activities should have seen him sail clean over it and into the dock.

The FBI's investigation

We next have to put the fact that Hansen was not prosecuted, despite his credentials as a potential star defendant, in the context of the infiltration of the SWP which we know was underway at that time.

Haverty-Stacke's book gives the history. Surveillance of the Trotskyist movement began in the mid-1930s, reaching into the SWP's activities in New York and Minneapolis by 1939-1940. However, at this stage, the operation was fairly rudimentary: at the level of paying a janitor to sift through rubbish bins to find information about delegates to an SWP congress. Having decided the party was a significant threat, the FBI worked hard to *increase* its penetration of the organisation, with a particular focus on recruiting informants within the SWP leadership.

As an example, FBI agents approached one of the co-founders of the SWP Carl Skoglund, who would go on to be a defendant at the Smith act trial, in early 1941. Skoglund, who had been forced to leave his native Sweden after being blacklisted for union organising and leading a protest movement among soldiers, was living in the US without the required papers. The FBI offered him permanent residence and impunity if he provided information on his comrades. He refused.

The important thing to keep in mind from this example is the offer of impunity, which we'll come back to.

Although it had no luck with Skoglund, the FBI evidently succeeded elsewhere, with its lead investigator into the SWP, Roy Noonan, testifying that the Bureau obtained a major new source in the autumn of 1940. At that time, he explained at trial, more specifically around November 1940, the FBI began to receive significant new information on several of the SWP defendants. He added that surveillance "was intensified in February and March of this year [1941]."

It was this information which ultimately set in motion the decision to prosecute. Haverty-Stacke writes that, for a long time, the scholarly literature accepted that Roosevelt moved against the SWP essentially as a favour to Teamsters President Dan Tobin, with whom the Trotskyists were in fierce political conflict in their union work in Minnesota, and who had written to Roosevelt in on June 12, 1941. This was also the SWP's claim at trial, and subsequently.

But Haverty-Stacke concludes based on her research that ultimately the Roosevelt administration "made the move in this case largely because of the intelligence he received from the FBI." She writes that "By the spring of 1941," the FBI's investigation "had broadened out beyond the Teamsters in Minneapolis to mesh with the existing investigations of national SWP leaders in New York." The SWP's "two most active branches [Minneapolis and New York] remained under heavy FBI surveillance, riddled with well-placed informants." And "The FBI watched the SWP's national headquarters in New York in particular very closely."

Demonstrating that fact, and quoting again from Eric's essay:

The FBI had full schedules of the national speaking tours before they were publicly announced, as well as minutes from Political Committee meetings. It was aware of who was elected to serve on what national board, including the Control Commission. The FBI had also acquired substantial information about foreign affiliates to the Fourth International...

All "indicating a high degree of infiltration of the New York

headquarters.”

Putting a rough start date on this dramatically increased FBI attention, Haverty-Stacke explains, echoing Noonan, that the Department of Justice “had already been seriously considering such prosecution as early as April 1941, *based on the independent investigation of the FBI dating back to the fall of 1940* [italics added].”

The dates line up extremely closely with what was revealed of Hansen’s meetings with the FBI by the investigations of *Security and the Fourth International*. This material has been explained in detail by previous lectures so I will review only the most essential facts to establish the timeline.

Hansen met repeatedly with officials at the US embassy in Mexico during August and September 1940.

On September 25, 1940, George P. Shaw, a high-ranking state department diplomat, sent a letter to Raymond E. Murphy, also of the US State Department, which read: “I am resorting again to a personal letter in order to acquaint you with a desire of Mr. Joseph Hansen, secretary to the late Mr. Trotsky, to establish confidential means by which he may be able to communicate with you and through you to this office from New York City.”

Hansen, Shaw wrote, “believes it possible that certain information may become available to him in which the Department will be interested ... For this reason he wishes to be put in touch with someone in your confidence located in New York *to whom confidential information could be imparted with impunity* [italics added].”

On September 30, Hansen was informed that his “intermediary” in New York would be B.E. Sackett, the agent in charge of the New York District of the FBI.

On October 23, Hansen wrote to Shaw that he would visit Sackett “shortly.” As Eric writes in his essay, “The public record of the communications between Hansen and the FBI stops after the October 23, 1940 note. This indicates that after Hansen returned to New York, the relationship took on a higher level of confidentiality and was subject to more stringent classification rules, which have hidden the communications from public view.” We do know, however, that Hoover personally directed that “Should Hansen call at the New York Office, he should be handled tactfully.”

Two key facts jump out from this record. Firstly, the development of relations between Hansen and the FBI at precisely the time it was able to escalate its operation against the SWP. Secondly, the language used regarding “impunity.” As we’ve noted, this was part of the offer made to Skoglund. It was part of the offer routinely made by the FBI in exchange for imparting significant information.

What it does not fit with is Hansen’s explanation for his actions, such as it was, that he was trying to advance the investigation into Trotsky’s assassination. What need would there be for impunity, in that case? As Eric writes, “Hansen’s request for personal legal protection had a purely individual character. He would not have made such a request if he had been contacting the FBI with the approval of the SWP.”

And this is of course underscored by the secrecy with which he conducted these relations, as was established by *Security and the Fourth International*, in interviews and at trial, through questioning of the former and current leaders of the SWP.

An additional proof is given, as Eric points out in his essay, by the fact that the SWP did not raise these meetings at the Smith Act Trial, as it surely would have if they had been known of—it would have been a powerful blow against the government’s case that it had apparently been cooperating with the leadership it now accused of conspiring against the government.

The most obvious and immediate “impunity” one can point to in Hansen’s life, after that point, is his escaping prosecution in the Smith Act Trial.

Ongoing infiltration of the SWP

What happened following the trial confirms that the FBI retained well-placed sources within the SWP throughout the 1940s and beyond. We’ve heard in previous lectures how the party’s leadership came to be replaced, under Hansen, by the Carleton 12, and about the role that leadership played.

The final section of this lecture will make clear that this was the product of a prolonged campaign of infiltration which would have given the “FBI faction” of the SWP a great advantage in its semi-political, semi-police manoeuvres against the principled Trotskyists.

The scale of the FBI’s operation was quite extraordinary. As Haverty-Stacke explains, in July 1945, the Bureau “went after the SWP with a vengeance... [Hoover] continued to gather reports on the party from agents stationed around the country, who worked closely with well-placed informants.” He kept up a “steady flow of memos to the attorney general highlighting the possible dangers and alleged criminal activity of the party and of individual members... found in the agents’ reports that he also forwarded to the Justice Department on a regular basis.”

Among those who were the subject of these extensive surveillance reports were leading members, imprisoned under the Smith Act, like Cannon, Vincent Dunne, Grace Carlson and Farrell Dobbs. The SWP was compromised at the very highest level. The FBI appears to have had access to all correspondence that passed through the headquarters and branch leaderships.

Of course, given the position of the SWP within the international movement, the implications of this went far beyond the United States, with the US government getting access to reports of Trotskyist activity all over the world, including in the Eastern bloc and in countries run by military dictatorships.

In terms of the SWP political activity which the FBI had eyes on, its reports include details of every major party plenum and conference, and full reports of Political Committee meetings. A 1948 memo from Hoover to the Attorney General requests: “At the present time an extensive investigation is being conducted of the Socialist Workers Party and the coverage of this National Convention is believed desirable. It is requested, therefore, that you authorize the use of technical equipment in connection with our surveillance work of the national Convention of the Socialist Workers Party.”

More broadly, the FBI had intimate knowledge of the work of the SWP’s branches, as far afield as Omaha, Kansas City, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Seattle, Los Angeles, Mississippi, New York and New Jersey. They had transcripts of branch meetings, full subscription lists to the party press, figures for the money raised by each branch and full meeting schedules. Some of these reports were as long as 80 pages.

The details included members’ home addresses, the ages of their children, their places of employment, their places of birth, their citizenship status and details regarding personal relationships and affairs. They also included the political positions taken by members in discussions.

This was a determined effort on the part of the US ruling class against what it clearly, and correctly, regarded as a major political threat. It should be remembered that the second half of the 1940s was characterised by an enormous upsurge of the class struggle in the United States. More than five million workers went on strike in the year following the end of the Second World War alone. The repressive Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 was passed in response to this strike wave. In such a context, the potential for the SWP to win broad layers to Trotskyism was recognised and acted against.

Agents were crucial to this effort. A lower-level rung of informers was in place everywhere the party carried out activity. Even more significantly, the records show at least 20 Confidential Informants in direct and regular communication with FBI officials, several of whom, given the information they were able to provide, clearly occupied key roles in the SWP leadership.

They were considered so valuable to the FBI that the Bureau listed them as “not in a position to testify” if the government were ever to bring a prosecution. They were too useful, or their exposure too embarrassing, to be deployed at trial. And the FBI was successful; its agents were able to carry out their activities without detection. In fact, as we know, the FBI’s networks remained in place within the SWP well into the following decades.

Haverty-Stacke notes that Hoover’s continued requests for surveillance were granted by the Justice Department “through 1948 and beyond.” She goes on: “as the Cold War heated up, Hoover’s pursuit of the SWP took on added intensity. The investigation of the party expanded with the growth of anti-communist sentiment and the new mechanisms created to facilitate such sentiment during the early 1950s that became hallmarks of the Second Red Scare.”

Looking further forward, the COINTELPRO revelations brought to light that fully 1,300 informants had been active within the party between 1961 and 1973.

All of this was concurrent with Hansen’s rise into a leading position in the SWP—becoming editor of *International Socialist Review* and then the *Militant* from the mid-1950s—and with the political degeneration of the organisation, for which he provided the major theoretical justifications.

In the early 50s, Hansen’s writings on McCarthyism adapted heavily to American liberalism. In the mid-50s, he championed the use of federal troops to enforce civil rights as a “revolutionary bourgeois” demand. He then played a major role in advocating reunification with the Pabloites and extending a hand to the Stalinists, sowing illusions in the self-reform of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union.

Of course, we do not take the view that the SWP was doomed by the FBI operation from the 1940s onwards. As we know, the majority of its leadership led by Cannon went on to play *the* critical role in the defence of the world Trotskyist movement with the publication of Cannon’s open letter in 1953. There was a fierce struggle between the pressures and the direct agents of world imperialism, and Stalinism, and the forces of Trotskyism.

We also do not take the view that the SWP’s ultimate capitulation to Pabloism was purely the result of the work of agents. But nor do we erect an artificial barrier between the two, which in fact shared a symbiotic relationship.

Security in the revolutionary movement involves all manner of practical steps. However, its foundation is fundamentally political. It is a culture of political seriousness, consistency and thorough, open and honest discussion which helps to expose those operating with a concealed agenda.

It is close attention to the development of cadre, politically informed awareness of the threats posed by one’s opponents—in the state and in other political tendencies—and above all an attitude which takes deadly seriously the necessity of a revolutionary Trotskyist party which creates an appropriate atmosphere of vigilance; which does not allow attacks on the organization, let alone the murder of Trotsky, to pass without forensic investigation.

The ongoing adaptation to Pabloism in the SWP meant a retreat on all these fronts, giving agents the freedom to carry out their work, including at the highest levels of the organisation. And that work drove out or isolated the principled elements within the party and strengthened the most disruptive forces, those most willing to adapt their politics to US and world imperialism and to its political agency in Stalinism. Both processes

were combined in the figure of Joseph Hansen.



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