

Keystone Defenders: The Politics of Civil Defense in Pennsylvania 1940-1960

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Abstract

During the Cold War era, the state of Pennsylvania experienced some of the most intense anti-Communist activism, and Pittsburgh especially was regarded as "that Mecca of the Inquisition". As the center of American industry in this period, it was also, arguably, the primary nuclear target in the United States. This paper traces the history of civil defense preparations in the state from the anti-German scare of the late 1930s through the mid-1960s, and stresses the growing emphasis on counter-subversion tactics to supplement the more obvious armaments designed to counter bombers or missiles. The paper also shows the intimate link between the civil defense establishment and the politics of extreme anti-Communism in the early 1950s.

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During the Cold War years, Pennsylvania was the scene of some of the most vigorous and indeed merciless anti-Communist campaigning, which long predated the McCarthy movement, and proceeded quite independently of those events. David Cauter's Great Fear includes a chapter entitled "Hell in Pittsburgh," describing the testimony of one long term infiltrator into the Communist Party, Matt Cvetic, and how his allegations initiated a period of purges and trials. Pittsburgh now became "that Mecca of the inquisition."¹ Philadelphia was equally subjected to major loyalty purges in 1952-53, while these events had ramifications in many smaller communities. The labor movement in the state experienced something like civil war, reaching a height with the schism in the vast United Electrical Workers' union (UE) in 1949-50. This anti-red trend was quite remarkable given the state's customary moderate bent, and association with middle of the road Republicanism. The governor from 1946 to 1950 was James

Duff, who was also elected US Senator in 1950. A remarkable moderate on issue like civil liberties and the environment, he was one of the first major Republicans to condemn McCarthy, but he also made no secret of his belief that all Communists were ipso facto traitors, and should be hanged. Furthermore, “if people put themselves in a position where their activities are doubtful, we are going to treat them if they are doubtful the way they are if they are wrong, because the time has come in America where we can’t continue to make mistakes with the people who are trying to destroy our Way of Life.” Such were the views of a moderate Republican in a politically moderate state in 1950. The Democratic Party was if anything even more fanatically anti-Communist, and in the 1950 Congressional elections achieved the unusual feat of red-baiting the Republicans for their alleged complacency on the Communist threat. The UE Left believed that the main Cold Warriors in the Pittsburgh region could be summarized as “the FBI, the Democratic party, and the CIO”.

Pennsylvania therefore emerges as a heartland of bipartisan anti-Communism of the most rigorous, red, white and blue in tooth and claw. Though it is no adequate excuse for the hysteria of these years, the popular consensus can only be understood against a background of likely war: emergency measures were justified because the nation might at any day face a military conflict of unprecedented savagery, and it was an urgent necessity to seek out and suppress potential spies and saboteurs. A clear and present danger to national security arguably did justify the suspension of some civil liberties. If there was a subversive threat, then all logic suggested that one primary targets would be the defense-related industries of Pennsylvania, its steelworks and coalmines, electrical plants and shipyards. Nor were concerns about a global war unfounded: such an outbreak was a real possibility at several points between, say, 1947 and 1962, and had this occurred, both superpowers would have exploited whatever assets they had behind enemy lines to cause maximum disruption. Both sides would likely have used front organizations to undermine the other side’s will to fight. As it would be suicidal to speak openly on behalf of a military enemy during wartime, anti-war propaganda would have to be carried on in the guise of other ideologies, such as humanitarian calls for world peace. Americans were here influenced by memories of the discredited isolationist movement which had been such a powerful voice before Pearl Harbor, and which in retrospect was (unfairly) regarded as a naive puppet of the Axis governments. If the United States might now be facing a nuclear Pearl Harbor, then the nation was

justified in using the harshest measures against subversives and their dupes, as a necessary part of the broader civil defense effort.²

If war broke out, then the experience of European states in the second world war suggested the likely dangers for a key industrial state like Pennsylvania, even before a Soviet nuclear attack was conceivable. While war industries and population centers would be targeted by long-range bombers, initial strikes would come from clandestine forces, either domestic guerrillas or Soviet special forces operating on the lines of the United States' own wartime OSS, or its British counterparts. In this perspective, Pennsylvania's Communist Party took on a sinister appearance as an organized conspiracy that specifically targeted the leading industries for recruitment and propaganda, while several of its leaders had significant experience in clandestine warfare. One of the most notorious was Steve Nelson, with his dazzling record in the Spanish Civil War, while the remarkable career of George Wuchinich included a spell in the OSS, serving with Tito's Partisans, and later alongside Chinese Communist forces. In 1949, HUAC remarked that "Because of his military training and espionage experience, and because western Pennsylvania is a highly strategic industrial area, Wuchinich is one of the most dangerous individuals in the American Slav Congress."

In reality, evidence of actual or planned sabotage was next to none, and this negative statement can be justified by the failure of state or federal authorities to produce substantiated charges at the time: between 1945 and 1955, the FBI had a dozen known agents in place in the state's Communist apparatus, and if any of them had encountered serious military or conspiratorial plans, these would presumably have come to light in trials for sedition, treason or espionage. None did: instead, Party leaders were tried on unconvincing charges of seeking to overthrow the United States government by distributing Communist propaganda works. Nevertheless, the hatred of Communists can only be understood in this fifth column context, that they were viewed as potential enemy agents in a "next war," which might only be days or weeks away. And these perceptions were all the more potent because of the recent experiences of the fifth column panic of the early 1940s, which had actually targeted many of the same groups and individuals who came to the fore in 1950.

Anti-Communist suspicions became lethally dangerous following the outbreak of the Korean war in 1950, when Communist sympathy for foreign powers was potentially transformed into support for an

enemy power with which the United States was in armed conflict, so that treason charges became a real likelihood: perhaps Governor Duff would have his way after all, and mass hangings would ensue. When Pittsburgh's CP headquarters were raided in 1950, seized documents opposing the war were quoted as showing the Party's allegedly treacherous positions: "The document does state in part its hope and wishes that the American forces fighting in South Korea take a shellacking." Korean events had a double resonance for Catholics and many ethnic groups, in raising fears of an imminent Soviet military move against Western Europe. The events of June 25, 1950, a second day of infamy, fundamentally changed the whole political environment for dissent within the United States. The intensified anti-subversive quest of the next three years is conventionally known as McCarthyism, but might with more justice be termed the Korean War Red Scare. No account of this movement can afford to ignore the element of living in "pre-war" conditions, or that regions like Pennsylvania already regarded themselves as a critical home front in the emerging global struggle. The anti-Communist purges, which reached their height in 1950, are best seen as part of the overall civil defense effort, and that movement had its roots even before the second world war.

The Fifth Column Scare 1939-42

The anti-Communist events of the early 1950s grew out of a long history, and in fact, follow very directly upon the precedents of the second world war years, when a "fifth column panic" had raged in the popular media, and had had a major impact upon policy-makers. In Pennsylvania as much as any state, the fifth column was a constant nightmare from about 1939 through 1942, and fighting this danger consumed much of the energy of the state government and law enforcement authorities.

During the late 1930s, Pennsylvania was home to several of the countless far-Right sects that flourished in the Depression years³. As a European war approached in 1939, it was an obvious question whether these domestic groups might actively support the Nazi or Fascist cause in time of war, by engaging in sabotage or even launching a guerrilla war on American soil. In January 1940, the leaders of the New York Christian Front were prosecuted for planning an urban guerrilla campaign that was intended to provoke a civil war in the United States, while in August, Bund members and Klansmen held joint military exercises in New Jersey. While there was less open talk of fascist revolution after early 1940, fears of terrorism and sabotage continued unabated for years afterwards. Rumors about

sabotage at military plants had been circulating for some time, but intensified as war grew more likely in 1940 and early 1941. Of course, many of these rumors were simply false, and even when sabotage occurred, it was not necessarily politically motivated. Some sources depicted as suspicious virtually every fire and explosion that could be linked (however weakly) to the rearmament effort, and they offered wildly exaggerated lists of several hundred fires and explosions which they regarded as enemy action. On the other hand, some of the incidents were viewed as sabotage at the time by experts or police authorities who were in an excellent position to judge.

If a “fifth column” was planning serious subversive activity, then Pennsylvania was vulnerable as a critical center of the military build-up in 1940-41, and of subsequent war production. In November 1941, New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia reminded an audience in Harrisburg that “Here in Pennsylvania you have so many centers that are attractive and tempting targets to an enemy”. These military facilities were viewed as likely targets for enemy action. In 1938 there was an abortive investigation of possible tampering with shell production at the Frankford Arsenal. Some alleged incidents of sabotage appeared to be plausible examples of planned sabotage. One of the most convincing events involved the three near-simultaneous explosions in munitions plants in New Jersey and Pennsylvania that November, a coincidence that, as Secretary of War Stimson remarked, “might suggest Teutonic efficiency”. The targets, if such they were, included the Burton Powder works of American Cyanamid and Chemical Corporation in Edinburg, near New Castle, and the Trojan Powder company at Troxell’s Crossing near Allentown. The newspapers noted that these were only the latest in a lengthy series of inexplicable disasters in the munitions industry in the north-eastern United States. In 1940, the Philadelphia papers headlined a series of sabotage attempts at the Sun Shipyards in Chester. In January, persons unknown opened the sea valves of a new vessel destined to serve as a troop ship. In October, a congressional committee heard of literally dozens of recent incidents at the same yard. In 1941, there were several fires in the Philadelphia Navy Yards and the Frankford Arsenal. Perhaps significantly, the Navy Yards had been listed as one of the potential targets of the Christian Front terrorists prosecuted in 1940. Throughout these years, the media gave heavy coverage to thefts of dynamite and other explosives, with the suggestion that these were intended for use by fifth columnists. By November 1940, the Philadelphia Record was headlining “FBI Battles Wave of Sabotage”.

Communications were also seen as vulnerable, with the new Pennsylvania Turnpike an obvious target: in August 1939 a narrowly averted dynamite attack came close to destroying a key bridge in Bedford County. Charges of railroad sabotage and line-tampering were numerous through 1940, and in June the Lehigh Valley Railroad reported “several cases of sabotage”. The following March, public concern about the subversive threat was focused by a rail crash, when the Pennsylvania Railroad’s Cleveland to Pittsburgh express train crashed near Ambridge in Beaver County, killing five. The railroad authorities were certain that tampering had been involved, but the political motive was less apparent. The leftist news-magazine The Hour linked the attack to Ukrainian-American groups working for German intelligence. Historian Charles Higham writes that in these months, Ukrainian fifth columnists spread out across the country, with a particular concentration on “virtually the whole of Pittsburgh, with its mills, railroad yards and river barges”.

Apart from the Ukrainians, concern about sabotage naturally focused on Germans sympathetic to Hitler. Coincidentally or otherwise, the German-American Bund’s paramilitary training camp at Sellersville in Bucks County was located close to a factory manufacturing gauges for the armed forces, and Bund rallies here were said to have attracted workers from the Navy Yard and the Frankford Arsenal. Some Irish-Americans were also working in concert with Axis agents. In June 1939, it was feared that German-sponsored Irish agents were plotting to assassinate the king and queen of England as they traveled through Pennsylvania by train. A massive security operation was launched involving a huge commitment of Motor Police and National Guard, who were warned to watch carefully for rail sabotage, or “for the throwing of a bomb or hand grenade by someone standing in a crowd or someone passing in an automobile . . . for someone sniping from a hillside with a rifle or someone in a crowd firing at the trains”. In October 1940, the Pennsylvania Motor Police were discussing the possibility that the state’s revived Ku Klux Klan might become active as a “Legion of Death”.

The reality of these supposed plots and attacks is controversial. War fears clearly made people made people willing to jump to unwarranted conclusions, and to accept wild rumors: in June 1940, for instance, Philadelphia experienced a short-lived panic following a report that hundreds of “fifth column rifles” had been unloaded from a truck downtown. The report was more solidly based than most in that someone was reporting a genuine event, but the weapons were in fact wooden theatrical props. On the

other hand, well-informed later writers like Ladislav Farrago accept that German rings were carrying out sabotage attacks, presumably operating through American agents and sympathizers. Also, that the alleged attacks were genuinely aimed at targets of concern to the Germans is confirmed by the incident in June 1942, when Nazi agents were landed by submarine in Florida and on Long Island. Their critical targets in Pennsylvania included a Philadelphia cryolite plant producing the materials essential for the manufacture of aluminum: also listed was the Horseshoe Curve near Altoona, the destruction of which would paralyze the production and transportation of coal, and delay troop movements to the East Coast.

Though ultra-rightists bore the brunt of suspicions, the Communist Left also came under attack following the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, and the political repression of Communism in western Pennsylvania in the Spring of 1940 looked almost exactly like what would occur exactly a decade later, and in both eras, the media suggested that the suppression of Communists was essential to national security: when dozens of Communists were indicted in an election fraud case, the Post-Gazette crowed about “a smashing attack against leftist activists in this important national defense area.” The best-known target here, in 1940 as in 1950, was Communist veteran James Dolsen, who was described in the Pittsburgh area press as an agent of the Soviet OGPU. All the more humiliating, Left-wing leaders were interviewed by the Dies Committee as part of a wider investigation into pro-Nazi and fascist militants, suggesting that all were equally connected with international totalitarianism, and potential anti-American sabotage activities.

Creating a Civil Defense Machinery

State and federal authorities had excellent reason to fear subversive activity, and they prepared extensive counter-measures. From the Spring of 1939 the FBI in Philadelphia was investigating pro-Nazi and Christian Front paramilitaries in the region, and at the end of the year the local field office was strengthened and restructured in order to combat potential tampering with shipping along the Delaware waterfront. It was exactly at this time, 1940 and 1941, that the FBI was planting within the Communist Party those moles and defectors who would surface with such embarrassing consequences a decade later, including Matt Cvetic himself.

The other counter-subversive agency in the Commonwealth was the State Police, which from 1937 to 1943 was technically known as the Pennsylvania Motor Police (PMP). As 1940 progressed, the

PMP developed a systematic plan to prevent fifth column activity, a concern that reached new heights after the Fall of France and the threat of a German invasion of Great Britain. In July, the PMP was instructed to observe and defend telephone and telegraph lines, to be on the watch for suspicious activities near suspicious points. In October, the PMP issued a series of directives which taken together illustrated the breadth of concern. One was intended to forestall the “probability” of “sabotage activity involving plants manufacturing war materials”: these vital installations were to be listed and contacted, with plainclothes officers in place. At the same time, liquid fuel refineries and storage plants were to be kept under surveillance, presumably to prevent a repeat of the Black Tom disaster of 1916, when German agents had blown up an armaments plant. Similar edicts were intended to protect electric light and power facilities, railroad bridges and tunnels. The force remained on high alert until a new series of orders following Pearl Harbor tightened security further, with an emphasis on waterworks and the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

Though actual invasion was not discussed as a high likelihood, in November 1941 Pennsylvania authorities collaborated in preparing a massive contingency plan to evacuate the state of New Jersey if need arose. There were sporadic scares over the next year, as nervous locals reported the landing of a kite as a possible parachute attack, or a Nazi agent come to link up with local fifth columnists: Lancaster County endured one such panic in mid-1942. Fears were intense on and near major holidays, especially following the submarine landing in June 1942. Shortly afterwards the PMP warned all its forces “that our enemies choose occasions such as the Fourth of July to strike us. Therefore, everyone should be on the alert particularly for sabotage or other acts of the enemy.”

For all its efficiency, the PMP was far too small a force to defend so many installations over the whole Commonwealth, and the task of protection increasingly fell to voluntarism and private enterprise. The most important body here was the American Legion, an authentic mass movement with almost a hundred thousand members in Pennsylvania alone by the late 1930s. Since its inception in 1919, Legionnaires had often turned out as vigilantes to combat what they saw as Communist-inspired activism in labor disputes, but now they targeted Nazi influences. Though the Legion had wide differences about the need for American intervention in the European war, the vast majority of its membership bitterly resented the growth of “un-American” groups like the Bund, and were anxious to

root out sabotage and fifth column activity. Legionnaires regularly picketed fascist meetings, and maintained surveillance on suspicious sites like the Bund's camp in Bucks county. Volunteers were happy to offer their services to informal organizations that sprang up to protect vital installations. By August 1940, the commander of the Pennsylvania Legion told the state Convention meeting in Reading that members were turning in between fifty and a hundred reports of suspicious activities each day, mainly concerning sabotage at industrial plants. If the figure is correct, this deluge of intelligence must have swamped the resources of the PMP and FBI, to both of whom it was routinely forwarded.

Legionnaires and members of other patriotic groups were recruited for the anti-fifth column activities which were coordinated by the commanders of the National Guard and PMP. In May 1940, the Philadelphia Record reported that an undercover force some thousands strong had been assembled from the "state police, veterans, Army Intelligence men, National Guard officers and special agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation", and that members were active "in all of the state's industrial; plants, railroads, shipyards, utility companies and steel plants". In the Fall, Pennsylvania was one of the first jurisdictions to mobilize a State Guard for local defense duties in the event of the National Guard being called to active duty. As the Reserve Defense Corps, this body received military weaponry during 1941, and following Pearl Harbor was activated to defend bridge and other strategic sites in Pennsylvania.

Officially encouraging civilian participation undoubtedly contributed to a general "spy fever", and an upsurge of vigilante movements of questionable usefulness. Often, they owed allegiance to one or more entrepreneurs who reveled in the trappings of secret armies and cloak-and-dagger work. Pennsylvania played home to an "American Vigilance Association" claiming 65,000 members, their identities (allegedly) known only to their chief. The group was initially formed in response to reports of sabotage along the Philadelphia-Camden waterfront, but it soon acquired strongly right-wing and anti-New Deal overtones, and was funded by anti-labor industrialists. Like saboteurs, counter-spies and vigilantes were much in vogue in 1940 and 1941.

Apocalypse Soon?

Civil defense preparations were naturally relaxed with the end of the European war, but concerns about new hostilities became intense in 1948-49, when Pennsylvania followed a federal directive to revive its wartime civil defense apparatus. Not surprisingly, the old-time anti-Communist militants were

prominent in this endeavor.⁴ By late 1949, the state civil defense committee was headed by Judge Vincent Carroll, a former chairman of the American Legion's state committee on national defense: as long ago as 1940, during the earlier sabotage scare, Carroll had argued that Communists had no place in the American electoral system, as "the right of free speech is only for those who deserve it."⁵ In 1950, Duff fulfilled the worst liberal fears about the rightist connotations of the civil defense movement when he appointed Major General Richard King Mellon to head the Commonwealth's Military and Civilian Defense Commission: Mellon was from the immensely rich Pittsburgh family who so often featured in leftist exposés of the super-rich.⁶

By 1950, the threat of open hostilities had become a prime concern of Pennsylvania's state government. In July, Governor Duff alerted the three fighter squadrons of the state's air National Guard for immediate combat duty, and a few days later, the governor wrote to warn local government authorities that "the rapid deterioration recently of the foreign situation has resulted in need for precaution, if not alarm."⁷ The desperate mood of the time is indicated by Duff's speech to the state American Legion convention in Philadelphia that August, just at the time when United Nations forces in Korea were fighting off savage attacks against the Pusan perimeter. The Governor warned that "Pennsylvania is bound to be one of the prime objectives of the Soviet Union not only by Communism but by major attack in the event of world war III," and that the state must consider the danger of Soviet bombers flying over the Pole. Pennsylvanians must be prepared "to have some of our principal cities bombed and bombed by the most terrible type of explosive that has ever been known to the human race. And therefore that would be the kind of occasion in which the subversive elements will await like some hidden bears to jump out and cause confusion."⁸

Duff stressed the linkage between direct Soviet attack and fifth column activities. He claimed that "in the event that the difficulty in Korea breaks out and explodes into world war III that one of the great fronts we must defend is the front here at home. And unless we make this home front secure it makes very little difference what happens anywhere else in the far flung corners of the world." Pennsylvania was uniquely vulnerable to subversion: "no other community anywhere in the whole country has the concentration of industry that there is in Pennsylvania," and "In this city, in Pittsburgh, in every large industrial community, there is a tremendous problem this very hour of sabotage." He

warned Legionnaires that, “No one knows better than you the widespread activities of Communism in this country. There are many large industrial establishments that have been infiltrated by those who do not believe in our Way of Life, and all they are awaiting is a favorable opportunity in order to do their dirty work.”

Governor Duff hoped to meet the challenge by reviving the civil defense system created during the second world war, and enforcing the emergency anti-sabotage legislation introduced in 1941 and 1943.⁹ With the state’s national guard unit called up for federal service, defensive policies would be implemented through state forces, which would coordinate with the State Police, home guard units, rifle clubs, and veterans’ organizations: this was of course a return to the wartime idea of the State Guard or Reserve Defense Corps. Duff’s new network of County Defense Councils would prepare “precautionary and remedial measures for the prompt detection and neutralizing of any sudden and unexpected invasion, such as from air attack against our vital industries.”¹⁰ Veterans and other volunteers would be critical to the revived ground observer corps, the first line of defense against air attack.

Industrial Pittsburgh was believed to be the key target for potential Communist assault. This danger was a frequent theme in the jeremiads of Judge Michael A. Musmanno, who was perhaps the state’s leading anti-red demagogue. He almost single-handed led the effort to prosecute the Pittsburgh CP leadership for sedition, and during the 1950 elections, he declared that, “Every communist in US is a Soviet paratrooper already landed here.” In 1951, it was his “Musmanno Act” which outlawed the Communist party within the Commonwealth. The judge claimed that “The steel city of America is reportedly listed in Moscow as the number one target of Russian aerial invasion:” apart from the steelworks, “the huge Westinghouse and other electrical plants manufacture the delicate equipment and machinery for submarines, radar and air engines.”¹¹ In May 1950, Pittsburgh’s Chairman of Civil Defense agreed that “Metropolitan Pittsburgh, the workshop of the world, is high on the list of strategic cities vital to the national defense. We are very vulnerable, and in the event of war, we could expect to be among the first to be bombed.” He was accordingly examining the likely consequences of a nuclear strike on the city, though he cautioned against “an unreasoning fear of radiation.” Pittsburgh’s preparations reached feverish intensity that August, when a volunteer army seven thousand strong was requested to come forward to staff positions on a 24-hour a day basis. They would have the task of

transmitting warnings of enemy threats, and getting help to devastated areas.¹²

Defense against the fifth column implied an intelligence response that was, of its nature, covert, but a surprising public statement at this time cast some light on the means by which Duff's "hidden bears" were to be hunted. In 1948, Pennsylvania's Civil Air Patrol issued a press release describing an ambitious plan to meet the "possibilities of an attack on the peace of United States through fifth column subversive activities," which would involve selecting members for intensive training in clandestine warfare, counter-insurgency, Communist methods and ideology, and the Russian language: training would be coordinated through an Army counter-intelligence school at Holabird Signal Depot in Baltimore. As the CAP was a part-time organization, this plan would require the support of the state's private corporations and businesses, each of which was asked to enlist at least one member of their firm in the CAP to take the counter-subversion course, while private industry was asked to subsidize the scheme. Businesses would "report via this enlistee all persons in their organization known to have Communistic or subversive tendencies." The military link with industry was sensitive in a state that had less than twenty years ago rid itself of its loathed Coal and Iron Police, an employers' militia which appeared to be coming back under a different guise. The left-liberal York Gazette and Daily saw the proposal as "the frank bid of CAP to constitute itself as a form of loyalty police," while the Communist paper, The Worker, headlined "Industry Backs Labor Spy Ring in Pennsylvania Factories."¹³ Presumably the CAP was not the only agency in the state contemplating such internal security operations at this time, but it was the only one naive enough to discuss them openly.

Duff's concerns were wholeheartedly shared by the new governor, John S. Fine, who may, if anything, have been even more sensitive to the need for implacably anti-Communist politics: his political base was in Luzerne County, with its strong concentration of east and south European ethnic groups. Taking office in 1951, Fine announced that Pennsylvania was being placed on a war footing in expectation of imminent international hostilities which would "make our familiar backyards, the Turnpike, our suburbs and cities of today, the potential frontlines of tomorrow."¹⁴ Speaking to the Amvets convention at Harrisburg in July, he warned that "If and when the Communists decide to attack us, some of their bombs will reach home. Because they have atom bombs, eleven million Pennsylvanians for their own individual good will have to learn what to do if a bomb strikes."¹⁵ He

continued the civil defense bureaucracy established by Duff, so that by 1951, the state had 624 ground observation posts located over the whole state at eight mile intervals. Fine also expanded intelligence efforts. Pennsylvania had a well-established political surveillance system orchestrated through the State Police, but there now appeared “a new program integrating the work of the State Police and Justice Department against subversives. Our state now works closely with the FBI and with other progressive [sic] states to prevent any Communist infiltration.”¹⁶ The state’s Sabotage Prevention Act provided heavy penalties for the destruction of property affecting national defense facilities at a time of national emergency, and such acts would represent first degree murder if death resulted.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the State Council of Civil Defense alerted the public to possible dangers through training programs, films, and pamphlets with titles like “Protect your family - Keep it safe from biological warfare.” The Council advertised and distributed films like “Biological Warfare for Farmers,” “A Tale of Two Cities” (that is, Hiroshima and Nagasaki), “You Can Beat the A-Bomb,” “Our Cities Must Fight,” and of course, the notorious “Duck and Cover,” which told schoolchildren how to minimize nuclear damage by hiding under their desks.¹⁸ The new civil defense bureaucracy published a monthly newsletter, with articles like “Suppose the Enemy Uses Gas?,” “Coal Mines Studied for Shelter,” “Block Wardens the Key to Panic Control,” and “8,000 Nurses Take Atomic Nursing Course.” Public awareness of nuclear and other dangers was enhanced by state and local “preparedness days,” and by training in schools and churches, Granges and community groups. In a typical training drill in Bucks and Chester counties in 1952, the CAP initiated the imaginary “raid” by dropping leaflets which announced “This might have been a bomb.”¹⁹

The nuclear war scare reached its height in the first year of the Fine administration. In October 1951, “Defense” was the theme of the state’s “Pennsylvania Week,” and shortly afterwards, the director of Philadelphia’s Civil Defense Council asserted that the civil defense network would “be called upon to perform under fire very soon, possibly before the Spring of 1952 has passed.”²⁰ Obviously, this constant emphasis on sabotage, air-raids and civil defense served to fuel anti-Communist sentiment, and Leftists protested the “hysteria” generated by school drills.²¹ Talk of sabotage encouraged the rumors which buzzed in these years, like the charge that the Communists had poisoned the Pittsburgh reservoirs, or that a hoard of sabotage manuals (unaccountably written in Spanish) had been unloaded from a ship

at the Philadelphia docks. The press tended to sensationalize such reports, as when dynamite was discovered at a McKeesport steelworks, while paying little attention when the incident was explained innocently.²²

The defense of Pennsylvania's cities and industries was obviously a priority for the federal government. Apart from its economic significance, Pennsylvania also possessed other key strategic sites. At Raven Rock, a remote location near the Maryland line, was the secret underground headquarters of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to be occupied in the event of nuclear catastrophe (York was earmarked as a possible national capital, if and when Washington ceased to exist).²³ Through the 1950s, the military planned to defend American cities from air attack, and Pittsburgh was prepared to resist bomber raids by the tactics used by London and other European cities during the second world war. By 1952, a fighter wing was based at greater Pittsburgh airport, its efforts supported by a "ring of steel" around the city, namely a network of anti-aircraft artillery positions in the surrounding hills, supported by the civil defense observer corps. Each battery was equipped with 90-mm guns and radar, with a detachment of 55 soldiers.²⁴

As the nuclear threat grew, the emphasis shifted from staving off air attack by shooting down bombers to preserving the population through shelters and evacuation procedures, and periodic air raid exercises gave an opportunity to test sirens and civil defense mobilization.²⁵ Material goods also required safeguarding. Already by 1951, major corporations like US Steel were taking the precaution of microfilming crucial records which were buried in disused deep quarries, in the hope that these would survive the loss of the Pittsburgh area. One site near Saxonburg in Butler county initially proved ideal, though other more remote locations were favored in later years, as the destructive power of nuclear weaponry grew.²⁶ These records would provide the basis for post-nuclear industrial reconstruction, in which executives of major corporations like Westinghouse, Alcoa and US Steel already had their assigned roles.²⁷

Suppressing Communism

As in 1940, the war scare provides an essential backdrop to the political events of these years, and the suppression of the political parties seen as covers for disloyalty. One key focus of anti-red enthusiasm was the Cvetic defection and testimony in February and March, and his subsequent

lionization through the popular media, which reached its height in the film I Was a Communist for the FBI²⁸. Meanwhile, Cvetic's main nemesis was Communist leader Steve Nelson, who served the local media as the visible face of the Soviet war effort on American soil. Anti-Communists saw him as a key agent of the Comintern or the Soviet secret police, or both, so that his presence in the industrial regions around Pittsburgh seemed a likely prelude to a campaign of sabotage in the event of war. The Pittsburgh Press greeted his arrival in 1948 with the description of Nelson as "inspector general for the Soviet underground." Nelson's supposed role as an "atomic spy" appeared in the first news stories reporting Cvetic's defection, and the Pittsburgh papers continued throughout the coverage to depict Nelson as a ruthless spymaster. One Sun-Telegraph story announced that "Plot to Cripple Nation Headed by Steve Nelson," in which columnist Howard Rushmore spoke of "Stalin's Fifth Column in this country," which operated through "red fascist cells."²⁹ The Pittsburgh Press claimed that "Nelson Gave M-Day Orders to Reds Here," giving local Communists instructions on how to act in the event of a war between the USSR and the American "enemy," an event that had apparently been thought imminent in the Spring of 1948.³⁰ The Atom Spy tag gained added significance over the coming months, as nuclear espionage was very much in the news, and one figure in the alleged Rosenberg network was Harry Gold, arrested in Philadelphia in May 1950.³¹ Though Gold had no direct links with the Pennsylvania Communist Party, the publicity accorded his case could not fail to carry the taint of treason to local Communists. Addressing workers at the Westinghouse plant, Musmanno declared, "That industrial strength the Philadelphia scientist [ie Gold] spoke of is dropping [sic] of an atom bomb which would level all of Pittsburgh like a finger crushing a grape. Do we have any of those people around here?"³²

Meanwhile, the crucial ballots within the UE union occurred in April, amidst an atmosphere of war panic: At the East Pittsburgh Westinghouse works, "Through the Democratic machine, Philip Murray arranged to get hold of the main gates in Westinghouse for gate meetings today and Wednesday. The UE was refused permits and the CIO was given permits for all the days at the main gates... Philip Murray arranged for the National Guard in full uniform with rifles and bayonets, followed by armored cars mounted with machine guns, to parade through East Pittsburgh to a noon gate rally where Judge Musmanno, dressed in Navy uniform, spoke for the [rightist] IUE and against the [left] UE."³³

The apparent imminence of war also condition the great sedition trials which got under way

Acting on information sworn out by the judge in his capacity as private citizen, the group seized large quantities of documents which would be used for a sedition prosecution against three key Party leaders, including Steve Nelson and James Dolsen, the latter of whom had been tried in the earlier 1940 purges. The action may be better understood when we note the timing, in the last two days of August 1950, at a time when the news media were grimly reporting the desperate plight of United Nations forces trapped within the Pusan perimeter, and the likelihood of a final Communist offensive within days or hours: for Musmanno, a move in Pittsburgh was his only way of striking a blow in the growing world conflict.

Decline

I have argued that the anti-Communist furor in Pennsylvania has to be seen as an integral part of the war scare which grew apace following the news in late 1949 of the Soviet atomic bomb and the fall of China, and which reached appalling heights with the Korean outbreak the following June. It should moreover be linked to the civil defense movement of the same years. Accordingly, as the fear of imminent global war slackened from mid-decade, so the political atmosphere eased greatly. Though nuclear fears rose once more between about 1959 and 1962, the political environment never again became quite as torrid as it had in 1950, and there were good military reasons for this. In a world of ICBMs and thermonuclear “hell-bombs”, sabotage and subversion became far less plausible or pressing a threat: poisoning reservoirs or blowing up bridges only made sense in a war lasting months or years, not the few days which would presumably mark the span of the next world war. As Tom Lehrer sang in the early 1960s, “we’ll all fry together when we fry”, and little difference would be made to this outcome by the efforts of secret paramilitary bands on American soil, no matter how determined or cunning.

Changing perceptions of the Communist peril are indicated by the history of the civil defense movement, which was transformed from a high social priority in the early 1960s to near-farcical irrelevance by the end of that decade. The Kennedy years marked the high point of perceptions of a direct nuclear threat to the state, and the Cuban missile crisis stirred commitment to civil defense to a remarkable intensity. Civil defense preparations in these years could no longer make the optimistic assumption that the US military would be able to shoot down Russian bombers, and the question was when, rather than if, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh would fall to nuclear missiles. Survival could only

come through evacuation or bomb shelters. In 1960, a civil defense scenario assumed that residents of the southern parts of metropolitan Pittsburgh would evacuate en masse to Uniontown in Fayette county, fleeing a city “torn, smashed and seared by a sneak atomic attack,” and such exercises were repeated through the early 1960s.³⁴

Defense preparedness reached its height in late 1962, during the Cuba crisis. By this point, 190 buildings in Pittsburgh stored survival supplies, and some shelter complexes were vast: facilities under the Federal Building and the Penn-Sheraton Hotel each claimed to be able to safeguard eight thousand residents, while the Carnegie Museum had supplies for twelve thousand.³⁵ One shelter complex in Wilkesburg boasted accommodation for nearly five thousand; Mount Lebanon had space for 6,400, complete with an underground hospital.³⁶ Allegheny County had almost three thousand shelters by this point, and notional space for 369,000 survivors. On a domestic level too, civic authorities enthusiastically sponsored nuclear drills in schools, and urged each family to develop its own survival plan and shelter area. The Cuba scare resulted in the official shelters receiving unprecedented attention, and all were now fully supplied with medical supplies, water and food, the last mainly in the form of notoriously indigestible crackers, intended “for sustaining life and for retaining vigor and good spirits.”³⁷ The Federal Building alone was stocked with nearly 30,000 gallons of water, as well as nearly two and a half million crackers, and 164 sanitation kits. ³⁸

After 1962, the large commitment to civil defense seemed increasingly irrelevant, as concern about global nuclear war diminished rapidly. By the mid-1960s, the news media were beginning to publish what would become an enduring genre of stories which noted the remaining vestiges of the civil defense establishment, but as monuments of a distant bygone era. As the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette asked in 1966, “Is Civil Defense Program Worth Saving”? Or as the Pittsburgh Press asked, succinctly, in 1972, “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Boom?”³⁹ Meanwhile, civil defense facilities deteriorated rapidly, so that by 1969, Pittsburgh’s Director of Civil Defense stated that the city could no longer be given an effective emergency warning in the event of attack. The sirens, powered by 1951 automobile engines, were going flat, and one had already ceased to function: to quote a 1971 newspaper headline, “City Bomb Sirens Rust in Silence.”⁴⁰ Shelters themselves were falling into disuse, and were being converted en masse into wine cellars, photographic dark rooms, indoor marijuana gardens, museums and simple

curios.⁴¹ The question of disposing of the remaining nuclear defenses remained a matter of semi-serious debate. What exactly could be done with the multi-million remaining Cuba-era crackers? They did not lend themselves to bulk feeding to animals because they were individually wrapped: moreover, experiments suggested that their dubious taste inspired consumer resistance among the zoo animals chosen for this experiment, even the bears.⁴²

In retrospect, civil defense has acquired a rather ludicrous reputation in American historical memory, as a kind of hysteria epitomized in documentaries like Atomic Cafe, and the movement did have its silly aspects, such as the “duck and cover” program. Having said this, the concept of civil defense, broadly understood, deserves recognition as one of the more powerful social and political impulses in mid-century America. Especially in its counter-subversive manifestations, the civil defense idea is essential to any understanding of what may otherwise seem like mystifying outbreaks of political repression in these years.

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PP Pittsburgh Press.

PPG Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

PPL Philadelphia Public Ledger

PSA Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg.

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PSU Pennsylvania State University, Pattee Library.

TU Temple University, Urban Archives

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