

Matthew Gerth, *Anti-Communism in Britain During the Early Cold War: A Very British Witch Hunt*, London: University of London Press, 2023, p. xii + 262, p/b, ISBN 978 19144 77355

In the early years of the Cold War, the spectre of anti-communism haunted Western governments. Fears gripped democratic governments that a fifth column of ideological saboteurs was running amok, particularly in the US. Anti-communist efforts led by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee typified this period of Red Scare. In many ways, this anti-communism became an ideology in its own right, with devotees dedicating huge amounts of time and resource to this political witch hunt. In the US, this is most clearly seen in Senate Committee meetings and the blacklisting of cultural figures with suspected communist ties. Across the Atlantic, however, a more subtle ideological conflict was taking place.

Matthew Gerth wisely approaches this 'very British witch hunt' thematically, opening the space to unpick the particularly British version of anti-communism in the early Cold War. The first chapter of this book considers the anti-communist efforts of Lord Vansittart and Sir Waldron Smithers under the neat label of 'British McCarthyism'. This draws clear parallels with McCarthy's activity in the US, offering a framework familiar to those interested in the period. This chapter is particularly effective in setting out the eccentric and committed nature of anti-communists, whose characters and mannerisms come through vividly in this piece. The second and third chapters focus on the anti-communism of the Labour government under Clement Attlee and the post-war Conservative government under Winston Churchill that followed. Whilst these two chapters are set out thematically, they flow neatly from one to another chronologically – a sensible and effective way to approach this challenging topic. The final two chapters assess the anti-communism of non-

governmental bodies in this period. Chapter four focuses on the activity of pressure groups including the British Housewives' League, the League of Empire Loyalists, Common Cause, Moral Rearmament, and the Economic League. This offers a fascinating insight into the way anti-communists sought to influence government policy from a position outside the formal halls of political power, but often with close links to policymakers and political parties. Finally, chapter five looks at the British trade union movement. Given their political position, trade unions were targeted by the Soviet government in order to influence British politics. The nature of this infiltration, however, was misinterpreted by political leaders of the day. Gerth deftly points out in this chapter that contemporary commentators showed deep concern about communists sparking increased numbers of industrial disputes. In reality, however, the leadership of trade unions had instead been infiltrated by communist figures to shape their direction – a subtle but important distinction.

By focusing on the British nature of this witch hunt, Gerth successfully steers this text away from the McCarthyite shadow looming over the study of anti-communism in this period. Doing so allows this piece to engage with the British experience of the Cold War, something easily lost in discussion of the 'Western' experience. However, by focusing predominantly on Britain, the international picture sometimes gets lost. For example, discussion of 1956 as a neat end point for this study points towards the events of the Suez Crisis marking Britain's decline as a significant world power. Whilst doubtless true, 1956 also saw two important events in the history of communism which are overlooked – Nikita Khrushchev's Secret Speech and the attempted revolution in Hungary. The impact of other international events in the early Cold War, such as the Berlin Blockade, the Chinese Revolution of 1949, and the establishment of international groupings such as NATO and the Warsaw Pact, might have also warranted further exploration from the British perspective,

particularly on how they contributed to the shaping of anti-communism. Similarly, a comparative assessment of anti-communism between nations has the potential to offer a nuanced understanding of both anti-communism as an ideology and the broader nature of British politics during the early Cold War. Comparison with McCarthyism in the US understandably runs throughout this piece, but there is much potential to expand this international lens to include other nations in Africa, South America, Asia and Europe. It is important to note that Gerth's approach works very well in highlighting the particularly 'British' nature of this anti-communism. Indeed, getting the balance right between domestic and international on this topic is exceptionally difficult, and a challenge to which there is no 'correct' answer. However, the potential that a broader international lens offers, both in understanding the particularly 'British' experience in this period and the development of anti-communism, is significant – something that future scholars working on this topic might wish to explore.

The way in which anti-communist individuals are presented without judgement or malice in this book is especially impressive. It would be easy to describe anti-communist characters in this period as being misguided, disturbed, or obsessed in their actions. However, by approaching them with a sense of generosity and constructive ambivalence, Gerth opens the space for an understanding of their actions, rather than a judgement of them. As a result, this book effectively offers a fascinating insight into how people can respond to an unknown political threat in often illogical and emotional ways – something that can be especially challenging for historians to take account of. The construction of myths about communists, even in the face of evidence to the contrary, is often stark in Gerth's book, reminding us of the need to remain critical in our own political judgements.

This book is in equal measure readable and well researched, bringing a complex period of political duplicity to life. It is based upon extensive archival work and a close reading of contemporaneous publications, effortlessly demonstrating a grasp of the period. It is recommended for those interested in post-War British politics and the early years of the Cold War, offering a refreshing perspective on this period of ideological tension.

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