Anti-Communism, Gender, and Race in the Depression-Era South

This article explores how white anti-communist groups, including the Ku Klux Klan, appealed to racial tensions in order to undercut the budding pro-black communist movement in the American South during the 1930s. It analyzes how Southern anti-communists organized inside and outside of government venues to target pro-black communist organizing. I address how the Klan and local government entities partnered to attack perceived communist threats by targeting interracial and gendered environments like universities through protests, vigilante justice, and police violence.

By Katherine Frances Cayton
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

A local band played “There’ll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight” in the town square, while flocks of white families from neighboring counties descended upon Scottsboro, Alabama, on April 6, 1931. The National Guard, though nominally on hand to prevent violence against the black community, bayoneted a black child. A sense of fanfare and unrest overwhelmed the town as the festivities began for the last of the nine trials of the “Scottsboro Boys.”

The Scottsboro Boys case, which became a symbol of the Communist Party in the Depression-era South, began on March 25, 1931, when nine black teenage boys were arrested for assaulting a few white men who were illegally riding on the train. After researching the events, the police changed the charge from the assault of the white men to the rape of two white female passengers. While these women were not riding in the same car as the nine boys, the Scottsboro Nine were each tried for rape, convicted, and sentenced to death via the electric chair over the course of three days.

The trial would have been forgotten if it were not for the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). The NAACP and the black elite pulled away from the conflict, afraid of supporting accused rapists, but the CPUSA devoted significant resources to fighting for the Scottsboro Boys in court. The Scottsboro case placed the CPUSA at the center of public debate, demonstrating its role as a significant political actor in the American South during the 1930s. The events in Scottsboro also elicited a strong anti-communist response from vigilante justice organizations and government actors, providing an early example of how anti-communist groups would use racially targeted, gender-based appeals to attack communist organizing.

Scholars of American politics have long situated anti-communism in the United States within discussions of race, academia, and gender. This dialogue is primarily focused on the years following World War II, when national dialogues on race and communism occupied the center of American public opinion, policy, and national events. Framed within the context of McCarthyism, the Cold War, and the civil rights movement, anti-communists used racialized, hyper-sexual themes and rhetoric to gain support. This language proved successful in undermining the communist movement. However, the success of this racial approach to anti-communism was not a foregone conclusion. In order to understand the efficacy of anti-communist actions in the latter part of the twentieth century, it is important to understand the origins of anti-black anti-communism.

The Great Depression provided a unique opportunity for the CPUSA to promote the failures of capitalism. Drawing on the racial history of the American South, the CPUSA recruited black Southerners with the promise of civil rights and racial equality. The success of black communism elicited a strong response from white Southern anti-communists. These anti-communists linked racial equality with communism by exploiting negative stereotypes of black Americans, such as the image of a predatory black man threatening white women.

The anti-communist movement enjoyed success through its racist and gendered arguments against social and economic equality, alongside targeted attacks on academics and activists. In examining the rhetoric and structure of these appeals, the relationship between race and communism in the American South during the 1930s can be better understood. In this article, I will discuss how anti-communists organized inside and outside of government channels in order to target pro-black communist organizing. I will argue that white anti-communist groups appealed to racial tensions in order to undercut the budding pro-black communist movement in the American South during the 1930s.

OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORIOGRAPHY

Much of the existing literature surrounding Depression-era communism focuses on the CPUSA’s appeals to African Americans. Scholars situate Depression-era communism at the intersection of a Soviet desire to exert a sphere of
influence in the United States and the racial disparities of
the Jim Crow South. This literature highlights prominent
activists, Communist International (Comintern) policies,
and divisions between black communists and the black
community at large. Exploring the vital role that race played
in bolstering the CPUSA’s authority, this literature rarely
addresses the opposition to these racial appeals. The primary
weakness of this historiography is its inability to address the
degree to which Depression-era black communism was met
with a racially charged, anti-communist response.

Robin Kelley’s *Hammer and Hoe* is the most authoritative
source on Depression-era communism. Kelley analyzes how
and why the CPUSA enjoyed success in the American South,
with an emphasis on its activity in Birmingham, Alabama.
Yet Kelley does not address other key hubs of communist
organizing and anti-communist responses, such as Atlanta.
As anti-black anti-communists organized across state
lines, targeted statewide university systems, and circulated
literature across the South, it is important to develop a more
regional understanding of Depression-era anti-communism.
Through a broader inquiry into anti-black, anti-communist
rhetoric and organizing on a regional level, this paper builds
on Kelley’s findings.

Alongside Kelley, most historians writing on the role of anti-
communist opposition highlight the cleavages forged between
black communists and non-communist, pro-equality blacks.
There is little scholarship, however, outlining responses to
black communism outside of the black community. While
some of this literature references central actors in the anti-
communist movement, such as the American Legion and Ku
Klux Klan, this literature does not delve into the structure,
tactics, and aims of these third party anti-communist groups.

**THE RISE OF ANTI-BLACK ANTI-COMMUNISM**

As early as 1922, the Comintern began to discuss what it
referred to as the “Negro question” in the United States. Noting
the discrepancy between stated American values
of democracy, freedom, and equality, and the reality of life
for many black Americans, the Comintern identified race
in the United States as a major political issue. In 1924, the
Comintern Executive Committee stated that “by ignoring
the question of racial antagonism our Party has allowed
the negro liberation movement in America to take a wrong
path and to get into the hands of the Negro bourgeoisie.”
Referencing a class of African Americans who were quickly
accumulating land and wealth, the Comintern blamed
this “negro bourgeoisie” for dividing the black community
along class lines. At its Sixth World Conference in 1928 the
Comintern called for a “national revolutionary movement”
in the American South. Determining that blacks in the
American South were an oppressed nation, the Comintern
hoped to bring about economic and racial equality through a
communist revolution.

Following the Sixth World Conference, the CPUSA
increasingly directed its attention toward black Southerners.
The CPUSA argued that because black Southerners
constituted an oppressed nation, they retained the “right
to self-determination: political power, control over the
economy, and the right to secede from the United States.”
Through this, the CPUSA hoped to establish a separate
black nation-state in the South. Selecting the industrial city of Birmingham, Alabama, as the center for its Southern
efforts, the CPUSA brought Northern white labor organizers
and other veteran communists to the South to reach out
to black Southerners. These efforts proved successful and
the CPUSA quickly gained a strong following in the black
community.

Evolving in reaction to black communism, Southern anti-
communist actors emerged as a loose network of third-party
community organizations. This nebulous structure stood in
stark contrast to the CPUSA’s intentional, well-structured ef-
forts in the South. Composed largely of preexisting commu-
nity actors, these organizations introduced anti-communism
into their platforms through conversations regarding Ameri-
can values. Using nationalistic, populist language, these
groups gained traction through letters to the editor in local
newspapers, distributing broadsides, and by releasing explic-
it anti-communist statements. One undated pamphlet from the Baltimore-based Christian Social Justice Fund listed the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Affairs, and National Guard as anti-communist ringleaders and “so-called Vigilantes whose principal occupation has been beating up labor organizers.”11 Initially adopting a strategy of vigilante justice, these anti-communist groups eventually settled into a system of loose partnerships with local and state governments.

Gaining momentum during the interwar period, these anti-communist groups developed in the midst of a period of extreme nativism. Part of this nativist framework lumped Catholics, radicals, and immigrants together as un-American actors. Creating a dichotomy between American and un-American values, this nativist framework defined un-American activity as left-leaning or anarchist. Under this framework, labor disputes existed as radical and innately un-American activity.12 To this end, it was common practice for anti-communists to hyperbolize the foreign origins of labor agitators in order to emphasize labor's anti-American nature. This was witnessed in the Sacco and Vanzetti case of 1920, during which two Italian immigrants were convicted of robbing and murdering a factory payroll representative.13 Noted anarchists, Sacco and Vanzetti became nationwide symbols of the belief that foreign labor actors represented a radical threat to democracy.14

Anti-communists drew on this framework to gain support, appealing to this critique of foreign labor. The membership card and oath for joining the Ku Klux Klan in the mid-1930s, for example, listed a series of provisions for new members. One of these tenets was a delineated ideology of “Pure Americanism” that required new Klan members to oppose “unwarranted strikes by foreign labor agitators.”15 Within the context of interwar nativism, the Klan's membership provision opposing “foreign labor” can be understood as a near synonym for radicals or communists at the time.

The anti-communist movement seized upon this anti-labor rhetoric, with local newspapers using headlines such as “Reds Linked with Violence” and “Outbreak Believed Work of Agitators” to describe union strikes.16 While many of these strikes were organized by neither communists nor foreigners, this exclamatory language created a framework of labor, violence, and foreign agitation that dominated the public discussion regarding communism. Anti-communists pinned labor strikes and violence on the CPUSA, regardless of the Communist Party's official position on the events. In perpetuating this perceived relationship between “foreign labor” and violence, anti-communists framed the CPUSA as rabble-rousing outsiders.

“Directly targeting perceived communist threats, these explicit anti-communist appeals served as the central component of new member drives for organizations like the Klan and the White Legion.”

Given the anti-communist framework surrounding “foreign labor,” the Klan's inclusion of this phrase in its membership agreements gains an increased significance. The inclusion of these anti-communist statements alongside central Klan values such as upholding “white supremacy” and “law and order” suggests the degree to which white supremacist groups felt threatened by communism.17 Through holding its members to a stringent anti-communist, anti-foreign, and anti-black standard in its membership cards, the Klan explicitly articulated and emphasized a division between pro-American values and communism.

This language seeped into other aspects of daily life. In 1922, for example, a Presbyterian pastor in St. Louis, Missouri, devoted a full sermon to justifying each point of the Klan's platform as uniquely Christian and pro-American.18 In discussing his disdain for labor agitators, the pastor noted, “I think the melting pot is about full and if much more is put in, it is going to boil over.”19 Suggesting that foreigners dominated too much of the “melting pot” of the United States, this sermon reinforced the Klan's skepticism toward foreign labor. While not explicitly naming communists in his sermon, this preacher's veiled jabs at foreigners functioned to target the CPUSA. By establishing a framework of coded language targeting communism, anti-communists were able to integrate their framing of communism as an un-American ideology into everyday conversation.

In some instances, this veneer of veiled language was abandoned, leading to more flagrant and straightforward attacks on communism. Directly targeting perceived communist threats, these explicit anti-communist appeals served as the central component of new member drives for organizations like the Klan and the White Legion. In the 1920s the Klan experienced the largest membership boom to date. This growth continued into the early 1930s, with
forty-four new Klaverns established in northern Alabama alone in 1934. For the Klan, communism provided a link between racial, economic, and gender equality movements.20 In opposing communism, Klan members could take action against each of these ideologies all at once.

Translating the anti-communist rhetoric of its membership pledges into action, the Birmingham Klan distributed thousands of leaflets in black neighborhoods reading “Negroes Beware: Do Not Attend Communist Meetings... Alabama is a good place for good negroes to live in, but it is a bad place for negroes who believe in SOCIAL EQUALITY. The Ku Klux Klan is Watching You. Take Heed.”21 These warnings were matched by actions from groups such as the White Legion, which burned crosses in the yards of prominent white communists. Though with the intent of specifically targeting communists, these cross burnings also targeted pro-racial equality whites who were not members of the CPUSA.22 Breaking past a system of veiled rhetoric, the direct and racially-targeted nature of these vigilante justice actors served as the foundation of organizations such as the Klan and White Legion’s uniquely racially-motivated anti-communist platform.

The case of Ben Davis illustrates the strength of anti-black, anti-communist vigilante justice organizations. Ben Davis was a member of an established upper-middle class black family from the Atlanta area. A prominent black communist intellectual, Davis served as the editor in chief of the well-circulated black weekly newspaper the Atlanta Independent. While coming from a strong Republican family, Davis became active in the CPUSA when he defended communist organizer Angelo Herndon in a 1932 trial. Soon joining the CPUSA, Davis used his social status, education, and family legacy to convince other middle-class Republican blacks to join the black communist movement.23 Davis’ magnetism placed him on the radar of anti-black, anti-communists. One day, Davis came to work to find a revolver tilted against his door with a note inside reading “The Ku Klux Klan rides again. Georgia is no place for bad niggers and red communists. Next time we’ll shoot.”24 Persistent threats from the Klan and other vigilante justice actors led Davis to flee the state of Georgia and gain a security detail to ensure his safety.25 Davis’s need to seek asylum and additional security measures demonstrates the degree to which the Klan proved threatening. More than letters and editorials, the anti-black, anti-communist language of these third-party organizations was translated into tangible action against black communists as well. Davis was one of many communist agitators who received similar threats and messages that demonstrated the strength of anti-communist aggression.

ANTI-COMMUNISM AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS
The role of third-party organizations in exacting vigilante justice was furthered through partnerships with local governments. Many anti-black, anti-communist groups maintained close relationships with prominent local government figures. To this point, in his autobiography on his experience with the communist movement in the American South, black communist organizer Harry Haywood noted that “men took off their police uniforms to put on the robes of the Klan.”26 More than a perceived relationship, these ties between anti-communist actors and local governments were most notable in the case of Georgia Governor Eugene Talmadge. Standing firmly against the New Deal, Talmadge’s flamboyant and inflammatory stances granted him a strong public following. Rising to the governorship in 1932, Talmadge incorporated this anti-communist rhetoric into a statewide political platform. Equating the New Deal with communism and warning the public of a “Nigra takeover,” Talmadge aimed to build a coalition that was “united to opposed Negroes, the New Deal and … Karl Marx.”27 Linked to the Klan, Talmadge provided a legitimate governmental voice for the opinions of anti-communist community organizations. Labeling all proponents of racial equality as “nigger-lovers” and communists, Talmadge integrated the rhetoric of the Klan and White Legion into a statewide political platform.28 In doing so, Talmadge normalized racialized anti-communist rhetoric as a contending political ideology.
With government support, anti-communist vigilante justice groups gained a state-sponsored enforcement mechanism. Early communist activity in Alabama in the 1930s sparked a series of local criminal anarchy ordinances in Birmingham. Aiming to “curb communism,” these laws were applied unevenly against black communist organizers. Despite offering legal avenues for attacking black communism, these anarchy laws were unable to fully subdue anti-communist vigilante justice. Rather than allowing police codes to manage “criminal anarchy,” however, white mobs continued to burn black communists in effigy. The CPUSA acknowledged “criminal anarchy,” however, white mobs continued to burn black communists in effigy. The CPUSA acknowledged this relationship between vigilante justice actors and the government, classifying the Georgia Klan as “virtually an arm of the state.” This blurred line between third-party anti-communist actors and government action was further exhibited when the City of Birmingham introduced the “Red Squad,” a special police unit established to target communist actors. Public code allowed the Red Squad to arrest and detain perceived public threats without a warrant for up to seventy-two hours, during which these officers physically abused communists until they “nearly lost consciousness.”

In these examples, city and state governments codified Governor Talmadge and other anti-communist leaders’ rhetoric as official policy. By incorporating vigilante tactics into governmental anti-communist enforcement strategy, local and state governments in the American South operated into governmental anti-communist enforcement strategy, local and state governments in the American South operated as a second arm of the anti-communist movement.

**ACADEMIA, RACE, AND ANTI-COMMUNISM**

Using its third-party organization and government support, the anti-communist movement developed gender and race-based appeals for public support. Anti-communists’ attacks on racial mixing and communism developed within two clear silos: attacks on academia and arguments surrounding sexual corruption, race, and communism.

Anti-communists found fertile ground for support in attacking left-leaning academics and academic institutions. Anti-communists connected racial equality, education, and communism to suggest that academics intended to use the classroom as a breeding ground for communist doctrine. For example, Frank Porter Graham, President of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) from 1930 to 1949, was berated in local newspapers for “social race mixing.”

Though Graham was not affiliated with the CPUSA, anti-communists used his support for “race agitation” as evidence that he was sympathetic to communism. In this manner, anti-communists capitalized on a fear that Graham would allow racial agitation and communist thought to seep into the North Carolina education system. Through these accusations, anti-communists used race-baiting to delegitimize Graham’s role as UNC President.

This oblique challenge to Graham’s authority stood alongside other anti-communist critiques of Graham’s liberal approach to racial equality. One letter to Graham written by anti-black UNC Professor Wesley Critz George in 1933 condemned racial mixing at the university as “almost sure to lead not into the smooth waters of universal amity but into the stormy seas of race conflicts.”

Publishing this letter in the *Burlington Daily Times News*, George’s statements served to publicly undercut Graham’s authority as UNC President on the basis of his positions on race. Though Graham was not a communist, anti-communists framed his support of racial equality as communist-sympathizing. Letters attacking Graham’s opinions on race and identifying him with communism served to present a public argument that Graham and other pro-racial equality academics were also seditious communists. In many ways, arguments such as this used communism as a way to discount racial equality. In framing Graham’s positions as radical and pro-communist, these critics were better able to discount Graham’s support for racial equality.

In their attack on academia, anti-communists monitored known pro-black communist academics. For example, anti-communists singled out Arthur Franklin Raper, a UNC Ph.D. and sociology professor at the all-female Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia, for his role in promoting pro-black thought in the classroom. Prominent within the Atlanta communist intellectual community, Raper served as the secretary for the Commission on Interracial Cooperation and as a co-founder of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. Mildred Davis Adams, valedictorian of the Agnes Scott Class of 1938, noted that Raper was not the only leftist professor on campus. Of these professors, however, Raper was one of the most progressive on issues of racial equality. In one example, Raper organized meetings between students from Agnes Scott and Spelman, a nearby historically black college. These meetings served as a forum to discuss how both sets of college students were studying and performing at the same level.

Breaking past racial stereotypes through hands-on action, it was Raper’s noted communist affiliation that led to his fame among anti-communists. In addressing racial equality in his coursework and identifying as a communist, Raper represented a series of progressive value sets that challenged supposed American values.

Due to his role as a professor and his study of race and communism, Raper was regularly monitored by anti-communist groups. Anti-communist actors collected old copies of the CPUSA’s newspaper *The Daily Worker* and other CPUSA materials, maintaining files on prominent communists and their activity. Believing that the best way to undercut the success of communist theory was through publicity, these anti-communist groups shared their findings through small publications and community newspapers.

For a few months in 1937 the anti-communist broadsheet *Georgia Women’s World* mentioned Raper almost every day. Articles and letters to the editor questioned Raper’s teaching certifications and connections to the CPUSA, as
anti-communists continually dismissed Raper’s teachings as “obscene and vulgar filth.” Aware that he was being monitored, Raper kept copies of the newspapers and articles that mentioned him. The references to Raper were so constant that when Raper was not mentioned in a nationally-run article on pro-black communism by the prominent anti-New Deal journalist Westbrook Pegler, Raper added in the article margins “I feel slighted. –AR.” Raper’s case reflects the dedicated rhythm of anti-communist monitoring and reporting of prominent communist academics. Though Raper was not the only academic to be monitored by anti-communist organizations, the daily articles on Raper in Georgia Women’s World demonstrate the sophistication and degree to which anti-communist groups kept tabs on perceived threats.

Anti-communist surveillance of Raper serves as an example of a broader wariness of pro-black communist academics that translated to tangible anti-communist action. In addition to monitoring pro-black communist academics, anti-communists also targeted universities at an institutional level. In 1940, a University of Georgia (UGA) history professor testified that Dr. Walter Cocking, the Dean of the UGA College of Education, hoped to “establish an integrated branch of the [UGA] campus near Athens.” Georgia Governor Talmadge ignored a University System Board of Regents report stating that there was no basis to these claims, instead circulating the story in his own weekly paper The Statesman. Talmadge then restructured the Board with solely members who opposed integration. Using ties with the Klan to elicit additional testimonies supporting the history professor’s initial claim, Talmadge went to great lengths to purge the UGA system of what he perceived to be a pro-racial equality communist threat. In light of the letters to Frank Porter Graham and surveillance of pro-communist, pro-equality academics such as Raper, Talmadge’s actions against the UGA system represented a step toward tangibly acting in response to communist academics. Moving beyond surveillance and threats, Talmadge’s example demonstrates how anti-communist thought manifested itself in policy and action against academics.
RACE, SEXUAL CORRUPTION, AND COMMUNISM

Anti-communists also developed a series of racialized, sex-based appeals that targeted fears of miscegenation and black promiscuity. This was achieved in a two-step process. First, anti-communists emphasized the relationship between communism and racial equality. Then, anti-communists emphasized an overly sexualized image of black men. Through a transitive property, anti-communists built a framework for equating communism with sexual deviancy. These appeals drew on a longstanding stereotype of black men as sexually aggressive and threatening toward white women. Highlighted in the 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, this theme can also be traced through minstrel shows and other cultural portrayals of black men throughout American history.43 In appealing to these racial stereotypes, anti-communists connected pro-black communism with the longstanding cultural image of the rapacious black man. Exhibited in the Scottsboro trial, anti-communists employed the image of “negro rapists” to create a “direct assault on white womanhood.”44 By framing black communists as a threat to vulnerable and easily corrupted white women, anti-communists established a paternalistic element to anti-communism.

In 1937, a series of mixed-raced communist meetings in the Atlanta area highlighted this sexualized anti-black approach to anti-communism. With the support of Raper, students from Agnes Scott attended these meetings. The Atlanta afternoon newspaper *The Atlanta Georgian* reported one such event, noting there was a “circle of approximately 45 people both white and negro boys and girls” in attendance.45 Hosted at the First Congregational Negro Church of Atlanta, the meeting was calm, orderly, and devoid of “fiery oratory” or other demonstrations.46 While described as a peaceful event, the meeting received significant backlash in local papers. Ardent anti-communists William L. Van Dyke, head of the Georgia White Legion, and James C. Davis, Chair of the Georgian American Legion, circulated letters expressing their outrage at the meeting. Commenting “do you think our young girls are old enough or wise enough to take care of themselves in communist-promoted meetings of mixed races,” these letters positioned anti-communism at the intersection of white female purity.47 Described by Robin Kelly as a “Southern ruler’s most precious property,” white women proved to be a valuable pawn of the anti-communist movement.48 In questioning whether Agnes Scott, or the public at large, was doing enough to protect young women, anti-communists presented an argument that was difficult to attack. In equating communism and racial equality with the exploitation of young white women, anti-communists developed a gendered and moralistic approach to their racial messaging.

Anti-communists incorporated this gender-based argument into their anti-academic rhetoric. Anti-communists argued that educators corrupted young women’s minds by promoting racial equality and integrating communist theories in the classroom. Van Dyke penned a series of letters to Agnes Scott President J.R. McCain demanding to know why these interracial meetings were housed at black churches and demanding to know who at the college allowed young women to attend interracial meetings. Van Dyke added that it was a citizen’s duty to be “alert and vigilant” when their “church, customs, usages and even government itself” was under attack.49 Suggesting that protecting young women was a civic duty, Van Dyke questioned the authority of institutions such as Agnes Scott when they did not protect young women. Another article in *Georgia Women’s World* commented that universities that did not protect the minds of young women acted as “Pied Pipers’ who are influencing the very cream of our young womanhood to degradation and ruin.”50 These statements stood alongside numerous others from letters questioning the validity of educators who did not protect the sanctity of female chastity. In this manner, anti-communists aimed to discredit educators and hold them accountable for exposing young women to supposedly corrupting values such as interracial mingling and perceived communist threats.

Many of these anti-black, sexually-charged statements were published in *Georgia Women’s World*. An anti-communist broadsheet with dubious ties to Governor Talmadge, the newspaper boasted the byline “All the News that’s Really News for Georgia Women.”51 Supported by the Women’s National Association for Preservation of White Race, the newspaper intentionally directed anti-communist propaganda toward young women. Filled with examples of communist impurity, riots, and attacks on white women attributed to communists across the South, each issue served as a warning sign to young women on the dangers of racial mixing and communism. In developing a newspaper strictly devoted to warning women away from the dangers of black communism, the anti-communist movement demonstrated its deep-seated fears of sexual corruption.

Anti-communist fear of black communists’ sexual impurity extended beyond public statements to private inquiries as well. On January 18, 1937, a woman who identified herself as Mrs. W.T. Mobley called Jessie Ames, one of Raper’s communist associates. Asking for more information on local communists, Mrs. Mobley asked Ames whether Raper and other prominent southern communists received payment for, what Mobley deemed to be, “propaganda.”52 Expressing concerns about “decent white girls [being put] up before Negroes as prostitutes,” Mobley’s comments demonstrated a fear of black sexuality and miscegenation.53 Adding that pro-racial equality communists were “endangering the safety of all white people in the South,” Mobley’s comments played into the broader conversation established in anti-communist literature.54 Demonstrating a fear that Southern morals and values were under attack by communists, black men, and “nasty, dirty Negro hussies,” Mobley’s comments reflect those of an average citizen in the South.55
Anti-Communism in the Depression-Era South

Though it cannot be ascertained that Mobley read anti-communist propaganda, the arguments used by the anti-communist movement are salient in her statements. That Mobley, an average citizen, took action by calling a local communist to discuss perceived connections between race, sexual deviancy, and communism demonstrates the degree to which anti-communist thought permeated Southern public consciousness.

CONCLUSION

The intersection of race and anti-communism is vital to understanding Depression-era black communism. The actions of racially motivated anti-communist actors in targeting academics, activists, and black communists in the 1930s provides insight into the racial, social, and political tensions of the era. These anti-communist actors arose out of existing community organizations, using vigilante justice tactics before building stronger relationships with government actors to exact justice. With support at the local and state government levels, anti-communists were able to codify their beliefs by shaping local ordinances, university systems, and police action. It was the actions of these Depression-era anti-black, anti-communist groups that established what would prove to be an enduring understanding of communism as un-American.

Depression-era anti-communists targeted black communism through calculated racialized attacks on academics and by portraying black communists as sexual predators. These themes continued to prove central to conversations on race, communism, and American identity for the remainder of the twentieth century. In 1965, anti-communist organizers sponsored a billboard reading “Communist Training School” on the route of Martin Luther King Jr.’s historic march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. Historian James Zeigler identified this moment as the epitome of what was, by the mid-1960s, an “all-too-familiar” anti-communist strategy of linking racial equality with communist activity. While King was not a communist, this anti-communist strategy of treating pro-black movements as seditious and anti-American can be traced to the rhetoric of Depression-era anti-communists.

In proving the saliency of gendered, anti-black messaging in garnering opposition to communism, Depression-era anti-communists’ work served as a foundation for Cold War anti-communism. Ultimately, through use of racialized messaging and appeals to racial tensions, anti-communists developed a series of rhetoric, attacks, and commentaries that allowed them to question and retaliate against the rising communist movement of the time.

Endnotes

[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[22] Kelley, 73.
[28] Harvey, et. al., 93-100.
[31] Haywood, 405.
[34] Ibid.
[37] Kuhn, 72-76.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Zeigler, 19.
[57] Ibid.