

Background to Whittaker Chambers and Communism

Whittaker Chambers (1901-1961) was an American who served Soviet communism within the United States for about thirteen years, first openly as a party member and then covertly in the underground; these years ended when he lost his faith in communism, and ten years after that he became famous as an anticommunist during the Alger Hiss spy case.

In 1925, Chambers joined what later became known as the CPUSA, the Communist Party of the United States of America. The CPUSA's general commitments were the promotion of communism and also the interests of the Soviet Union; these tasks were to be undertaken without regard to American loyalties or concerns, because the U.S. government—not being communist—was considered illegitimate. Even while a student at Columbia University in the early 1920s, it had been evident that Chambers possessed substantial talent as a writer. By 1932, despite misgivings over Stalin's leadership of the communist movement, he had become, according to his biographer, Sam Tanenhaus, "the 'hottest literary Bolshevik' in New York." A large readership for such ideas was now in place, as the United States was sinking deep into the Depression, and some Americans were embracing or at least entertaining the hope that communism offered.

That same year, however, the CPUSA summoned Chambers to a different vocation—one in the communist underground in Washington, D.C. From 1932 to 1938 Chambers would act as a handler for a secret network of communist spies employed in the federal government. While pursuing their government careers, these spies were to influence policy and carry out espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union. One of these secret communists/government employees was Alger Hiss, whom Chambers knew very well and whose career was on an upward path. The high point of Hiss's State Department career would come in 1945, when delegates from all over the world met in San Francisco to finalize the draft of the United Nations charter. Hiss would preside as secretary-general at this historic conference.

But, by 1938, Chambers had decided he could no longer stomach communism. Stalin's Great Purge had caused him to doubt, and the doubt led to a complete break. Fearing for his life, he at first went on the run with his wife and two children, but before long settled into a job with *Time* magazine. Chambers rose through the ranks at *Time* and became known as an ardent anticommunist. In 1948 he was drawn into the Hiss case as the main witness against Hiss, first in Congress and then in the courts. Hiss was finally found guilty of perjury in 1950: He had lied to a grand jury in denying he had turned over documents to Chambers in early 1938 and also in denying he had met with Chambers at that time—a charge of espionage had not been possible due to the statute of limitations.

In 1952, Whittaker Chambers' memoir, *Witness*, was published. Included among the many insights are reasons why a number of Americans in the previous era became communists, why some, like Chambers, broke with it, and why others, such as Alger Hiss, did not. This supplement features two excerpts from *Witness*: the first discusses why people joined the ranks of communism, and the second why some left later on. Even as an opponent of communism, Chambers still had feelings for the bright future it promised, but he rejected it for the rest of his life because of the outrages it actually committed.