HUAC Investigates North Carolina: How Federal Documents Can Help Uncover State and Local History

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Federal Documents in State/Local History

• Often overlooked as a potential source

• Perceived lack of relevance

• Lack of familiarity/esoteric quality

• Intimidation factor
Federal Documents in State/Local History (cont.)

- House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigations related to North Carolina offer a case study in how federal docs might be relevant to state/local history
House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)

- Created as a special committee to investigate Nazi propaganda in 1934-5
- Re-established in 1938; continued through 1944
- Became a permanent standing committee from 1945-1968
- Name changed to House Internal Security Committee in 1969
- Disbanded in 1975
House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)

- The committee actually met twice in NC
  - Asheville, May 1934
  - Charlotte, March 1956

- A number of other HUAC investigations touched on North Carolina

- On several occasions, HUAC’s activities impacted political developments in NC
Fascism in the Mountains: William Dudley Pelley and the Silver Legion of America

W.D. Pelley and the Silver Legion of America

- Founded in Asheville in January, 1933 by Pelley
- Known as the “Silver Shirts”
- Radical paramilitary organization
- Reached peak strength of 15,000 in 1934-35
- Anti-Semitic and Anti-Black
- One of the largest and most radical of the 1930s domestic fascist groups
The Special Committee Comes to Asheville

- Rise of the Silver Shirts helped spawn the “Brown Scare”

- Led to creation of Special Committee (1934)

- A subcommittee of HUAC came to Asheville in May, 1934 and held two days of hearings
End of the Silver Shirts

• 1939: Buncombe County issues arrest warrant for Pelley

• February, 1940: Pelley testifies before HUAC

• Pelley leaves Asheville and disbands Silver Shirts soon after

• Imprisoned from 1942-1950
Silver Shirt Sources


  – Los Angeles hearings contain testimony on Silver Shirts in So. Cal.
Silver Shirt Sources


  – Pelley’s testimony is in v. 12, pgs. 7201-7333.
  – The Silver Legion is also discussed extensively in V. 6.
The “Red Menace” in North Carolina: 1929-1960

Junius Scales. Source: NCPedia (http://ncpedia.org/scales-trial)
Communism in North Carolina: 1929-1960

• Always a small faction

• Centered in Triad and Triangle

• Focus on union organizing (tobacco and textile)

• Also strong at UNC-Chapel Hill

• Peak of popularity in late 1940s (250 members in 1947)
Communism in North Carolina: 1929-1960 (cont.)

- 1929: Gastonia textile workers’ strike
- 1948: Progressive Party campaign
- FTA Local 22 in Winston-Salem
- Junius Scales: 1947-1956
- Declined in late 1950s
HUAC and NC Communism

• NC did not have its own “Un-American Activities” committee

• Shreve-Regan bill (1949 & 1951)

• Fred Beal testified before Special Committee: 1939

• HUAC held several hearings regarding NC in the 1950s

• Came to Charlotte in March, 1956 for three days of hearings

• 1958 Atlanta hearings
HUAC and NC Communism: Sources


• *Communist Infiltration and Activities in the South. Hearings Before the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, Eighty-Fifth Congress, Second Session. 1958.* (Y 4. Un 1/2: C 73/95)


-Contains the testimony of Fred Beal, a disillusioned former communist who had been involved in the CPUSA’s campaign to organize the 1929 Gastonia, NC textile workers’ strike. Beal’s testimony can be found from pages 6006-6042.
The Spy who Ran for Governor

• In 1948, Mary Wolfe Price (1909-1980), became North Carolina’s first female gubernatorial candidate (Progressive Party)

• On July 30, 1948, Elizabeth Bentley testified before a Senate subcommittee that Price was part of a communist espionage network, and repeated the allegations before HUAC

• Price denied the charges, but they did hurt her candidacy and that of the Progressive Party

• By the 1970s, the charges were regarded as McCarthyite smears
VENONA Revelations

• 2,900 NKVD cables intercepted and decoded by Army SIS during the 1940s, declassified in 1995

• Helped answer lingering questions about Soviet/CPUSA espionage

• Revealed that Bentley was telling the truth, and that Price had been a Soviet spy (code name: “Dir” from 1941-1944)
The Spy who Ran for Governor: Sources


  – Bentley’s main testimony against Price is on pgs. 25-27 of Export Policy and Loyalty.
VENONA

National Security Agency: VENONA
https://www.nsa.gov/news-features/declassified-documents/venona/

Federal Bureau of Investigation: VENONA
https://vault.fbi.gov/Venona

Cold War International History Project: Venona Project and Vassiliev Notebooks Index and Concordance
http://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/venona-project
1965-66: HUAC vs. the “Pitt County Christian Fellowship Association”

KKK rally in Greenville, NC, October 1965. Source: Daily Reflector Image Collection (http://digital.lib.ecu.edu/3690)
1965: HUAC Investigates the Klan

- In October, 1965, HUAC opened a series of hearings on the Klan

- Investigation revealed that NC had more chapters ("Klaverns") of the United Klans of America (UKA) than any other state (112)

- Seven in Pitt County alone
“The United Klans of America
Knights of the Ku-Klux Klan
Welcome you to Greenville”
The “Pitt County Christian Fellowship Association”

- Cover name for the Greenville Klavern of the UKA
- Also known as the “Benevolent Association”
- Greenville, NC, resident and former Klansman George Leonard Williams testified about the organization in Jan. 1966
- About 40 active members (340 on the books)
- Leaders included Charlie Edwards (Police chief of Grimesland)
The “Pitt County Christian Fellowship Association”

• The negative publicity generated by Klan hearings provoked NC authorities into cracking down on the organization

• The UKA was a non-factor by mid-1967
1965: HUAC Investigates the Klan

  
  - Pts. 1 and 3 contain information on the Klan in NC
  - Williams testimony in pt. 3, pgs. 2867-2900
Conclusions

• Using federal documents gives a broader perspective to state and local history:
  – Impact of external actors on NC developments
  – Impact of NC developments elsewhere
  – Unique local conditions best perceived by comparison
  – Corrective to excessive focus on local sources
  – Opens new avenues for research
CWIS Blog & LibGuide

- Blog: http://blog.ecu.edu/sites/cwis/
- LibGuide: http://libguides.ecu.edu/cwis
- Slides and bibliography will be posted to blog soon
Questions?
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