

## The Novikoff Case

**Stalking the Academic Communist.** Intellectual Freedom and the Firing of Alex Novikoff. DAVID R. HOLMES. University Press of New England, Hanover, NH, 1989. xiv, 288 pp. + plates. \$35; paper, \$14.95.

In 1953, Alex Novikoff, a tenured professor of biochemistry who was to win international acclaim for his contributions to cell biology, was dismissed by the University of Vermont for refusing to answer questions about his Communist affiliations. Before the (Jenner) Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, he had invoked his Fifth Amendment right not to testify against himself, a personal claim to protected silence that allowed him to be tight-lipped in legal safety though at a high risk of public censure. Before the panels set up by his institution to judge his professional fitness (a matter called into question only by his notoriety as a resistant witness), he was somewhat more communicative. In the bosom of the academic family, he declared that he had not been a member of the Communist Party during his five-year period of service at the university, that he had taken refuge in the self-incrimination formula to avoid naming and thus injuring past associates, and that he was willing to discuss his own pre-Vermont politics with the trustees and his peers provided he could do so *in camera* and off the record. Wary of a pledge of confidentiality that might subject them to a congressional subpoena and that was not likely to calm local Red menace fears, the trustees demanded that Novikoff speak openly, and they fired him when he would not. In the annals of civil liberties, their action spoke louder than the professor's want of words. Although only one of a multitude of academic freedom cases that erupted over the Communist issue in the first postwar decade and one of a considerable number having to do with termination for non-disclosure, Novikoff's dismissal for lack of professional "responsibility, integrity and frankness," even as he was displaying an abundance of scientific creativity, dedication, and openness, and even as he stood ready to disburden himself quietly within the confines of a collegial society, stands out as a particularly perverse example of McCarthy mania.

Thirty years later, in a dramatic graduation ceremony, the University of Vermont awarded Novikoff an honorary degree. The citation referred exclusively to his scientific

work, which after a short hiatus had been transposed by Albert Einstein to the medical school that bore his name. But everyone understood that the point of this cap-and-gown celebration was to apologize for an institutional mistake. Just what was repented was not quite clear. The governing board of the university had never renounced the belief that the use of a constitutional privilege could properly be converted into a capital academic offense through the alchemy of a stringent candor ethic or that a professor's confession of bygone sins could not feasibly be given in private when the public's blood was up. At the most, the trustees conceded that the penalty imposed on Novikoff by their predecessors, whether or not it fit his crime, ill repaid his accomplishments, and this left open the question of whether it took unusual accomplishments to decontaminate an academic involved in suspect politics. All the same, even this ambiguous gesture was rare: few academic casualties of the anti-Communist crusade were invited back by a governing board to receive accolades signifying regret amid the tumultuous cheers of faculty and student well-wishers.

Novikoff had been reclaimed, but the Novikoff case had not been unriddled. The passing years had shed little light on its substantive issues. How long, how deep, how nefarious had been his ties to the Communist Party? What had the congressional committee and the intelligence agencies known about them and what use had they made of that knowledge? In *Stalking the Academic Communist*, David R. Holmes, an associate professor of education on the Vermont faculty, undertook to clear up these mysteries, principally to vindicate an admired local figure by telling the uncurtailed truth about him, secondarily to improve our understanding of the academic Cold War by analyzing one of its expressions at close range. In his empirical ambitions, the author was critically assisted by the willingness of his subject, late in life, to answer the questions he had theretofore parried, and by the accessibility of once classified or confidential sources of vital information, such as the security dossiers of the FBI obtainable under the Freedom of Information Act and the historical case files of the American Association of University Professors recently opened to scholarly inspection. For analytic guidance, the author turned to historians on

the left, especially to Ellen W. Schrecker, whose comprehensive overview of McCarthy era cases took faculty liberals to task for collaborating with governmental witch-hunters in what she saw as the suppression of mere dissent. The result is a political biography by a partisan who seeks above all to get the facts straight, a work filled with illuminating detail and some interpretative blind spots.

On the making of an academic Communist, New York City style, Holmes offers a persuasive sociology. The son of poor Jewish immigrants who fled Czarist Russia shortly before the Revolution, a precocious and ambitious student whose quest for a medical education had been thwarted by thinly disguised Jewish admission quotas, Novikoff was a young tutor on the faculty of Brooklyn College, a position noted for its meager rewards and great insecurity, when he joined an underground branch of the Communist Party on that campus in 1935. Coming to political consciousness when international Communism claimed to be the vanguard enemy of fascism might have been enough to make Novikoff a fellow traveler, but it took the force of everything else—a father who read the Communist Yiddish *Freiheit* rather than the mildly socialist *Jewish Daily Forward*, a Marxist critique of capitalism fanned by the Great Depression, resentments bred by anti-Semitic discrimination and the tribulations of the low-rank life, the radical student culture of a municipal college that reflected the leftish temper of the parent city—to turn an unsophisticated 23-year-old into a clandestine Party activist. The author argues, again convincingly, that the things an academic of that description did were of a petty, if not necessarily innocuous, sort. Novikoff spent most of his time in active service to the Party editing a strident campus sheet that mingled the bread-and-butter demands of the junior faculty with pleas for collective security and popular fronts and that was not above peppering enemies on the senior faculty and in the administration with anonymous (and to them infuriating) insults. Holmes concludes that Novikoff and his cohorts did not take orders from Party headquarters (though he demonstrates that they did at times receive them), did not try to convert or recruit students in their classrooms (what they did in public forums is not reported), and did not have revolution on their minds (their furthest dream of worldly influence apparently was to help a Communist faction take control of the union of the city's public schoolteachers). Finally, Holmes has something instructive to say about the unmaking of an academic Communist. By the end of the war, Novikoff—by his own assertion, which nothing

in the government's files contradicts—had left the Communist Party. According to the author, he closed this chapter of his life not with a bang and hardly with a whimper: he simply came to perceive that cellular politics had lost its appeal to the wretched of the Brooklyn College earth and that it was likely to be a burden to his own slowly improving career. The terms of disengagement—a gradual weaning, not an explosive break—allowed Novikoff to become (in Hannah Arendt's terms) a "former Communist," remaining emotionally bonded to old associates and despising tattling, rather than an "ex-Communist," regarding non-defectors as sunk in evil and exposing them to save the world. And doubtless there were many more of the former than those familiar with Whitaker Chambers's epiphanies and Elizabeth Bentley's divulgations would suspect.

At the same time, there is something missing from this account of tempests confined to agit-teapots and of a disentanglement effortlessly achieved. In a book-long disquisition on the subject of American Communism, Holmes mentions the name of Stalin only once and the egregious handiwork of Stalinism not at all; the rigged trials and purges in Moscow, the anti-Trotsky plottings of the Comintern, and the bloody Communist-led civil war within the Spanish Civil War might have taken place on another

planet. Not looking for signs of intellectual surrender to the Machiavellian twists of Russian foreign policy, Holmes ignores the fact that Novikoff, in contrast to a good many who entered the Party about when he did, did not bolt in 1939 when the Soviet Union signed a nonaggression pact with Nazi Germany that sealed the fate of most of democratic Europe and the Jews. Finally, although he reveals that Novikoff, in concert with his confederates, had falsely sworn that he was not a Communist in a New York legislative investigation held before the war, Holmes does not draw a connection between chorused lying and Party discipline, or between the fear of a charge of previous perjury and the decision to be close-mouthed in the next bout with the prying state. Once again, it would appear, a scholar of the New Left finds it difficult to grasp the full mental universe of the Old.

But even if that mentality were fully grasped, it would not justify the government's overreach. The story of the state's persecutory conduct as told by Holmes comes to this: for 15 years prior to the Vermont dénouement and for 20 years thereafter, through periods of relationships between the United States and the Soviet Union that ran from moderately warm to icy cold, and despite the absence of anything on the record to suggest sabotage or espionage

and the presence of much that attested to his basic loyalty, Novikoff was subjected to hugger-mugger harassments by the state that included his rejection for a military commission, the striking of his name from a publication supported by federal funds, and the termination of government consultantships. An honorary degree conferred on Novikoff by a penitent FBI would have been in order.

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## A Developmental Model

**Molecular Biology of *Dictyostelium* Development.** ALAN R. KIMMEL, Ed. Liss, New York, 1989. xvi, 483 pp., + illus. \$80. *Developmental Genetics*, vol. 9, no. 4/5 (1988). From a symposium, Airlie, VA, Nov. 1987.

Ever since 1935, when the late K. B. Raper scooped the first specimen of *Dictyostelium discoideum* from a North Carolina forest floor, biologists have been intrigued by the life cycle of this little amoeboid organism. In their natural environment, these cells are independent organisms that feed on bacteria in forest detritus and divide by binary fission. When food becomes scarce, the amoebae enter one of two developmental cycles. In the asexual life cycle (the process most familiar to students of freshman biology and most studied by dictyophiles), the amoebae synchronously aggregate into mounds of about 100,000 cells, differentiate into prestalk and prespore cell types, and form a motile multicellular slug that migrates toward light and an agreeable temperature. The final stages of differentiation are accompanied by elegant morphological changes that culminate in the formation of a fruiting body consisting of dormant spores held aloft by dead cellulose-coated stalk cells. In addition to their usefulness as a relatively simple developmental model, the ease with which large quantities of the amoebae can be grown and fractionated has made *Dictyostelium* a system of choice for the study of complex cellular processes (such as chemotaxis and cell-cell adhesion) that benefit from a multidisciplinary approach.

In this book, fittingly dedicated to Raper, Alan Kimmel has organized 40 contributions from a 1987 meeting at Airlie, Virginia, into a cohesive text that covers the biochemistry, genetics, and molecular biology of development in *Dictyostelium discoideum* and related species.

The first section deals with the molecular biology of signal transduction during starva-



An establishment that figured in the Novikoff case. Among the items presented as evidence in the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee hearings were a catalog from the Jefferson School in New York, identified by the subcommittee as a Communist training school, listing courses Novikoff taught there and "a listing of books available for purchase from the Communist-sponsored Workers Bookshop in New York City" that included Novikoff's *From Head to Foot: Our Bodies and How They Work* (Progress Books, 1947). [From *Stalking the Academic Communist*]