

UC Berkeley

Journal of Right-Wing Studies

Title

Violence at Peekskill! Paul Robeson, Anti-Communism, and Populist Fascism Among Veterans

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4rj3w3cf>

Journal

Journal of Right-Wing Studies, 4(1)

Author

Lynn, Denise

Publication Date

2026-09-15

DOI

10.5070/RW3.39669

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

ARTICLE

2

Violence at Peekskill!

Paul Robeson, Anti-Communism, and Populist Fascism Among Veterans

DENISE LYNN

University of Southern Indiana

Abstract: *In 1949, two riots rocked Paul Robeson concerts in Peekskill, New York. The riots were provoked by local veterans' organizations and were not anomalous, as the American Legion and other groups intentionally targeted Robeson and his public appearances. Though scholars have examined the Peekskill riots and their relationship to Paul Robeson's increased radicalism and his declining popularity, this article centers veterans' organizing against Robeson as intentional, and the violence as unexceptional. Cold War anti-communism empowered veterans' organizations to engage in what I call populist fascism—grassroots organizing against progressives and radicals that restrained citizens' rights, especially those of Black citizens, and sometimes erupted in violence. As the Peekskill riots show, law enforcement and the criminal legal system did little to prevent violence against the Robeson concerts, and the rioters faced fewer punitive consequences than alleged communists. Robeson was targeted because of anti-Black and anti-communist hysteria. The violence at the Peekskill concerts was not spontaneous protest but part of a larger conspiracy to restrain Robeson's political radicalism and contain progressive gains. Anti-communism enabled popular political expression that likened progressive anti-racism to treason and encouraged populist fascism among those who felt empowered to set the terms of Americanism, defined as defense of free enterprise and the "American way of life."*

Keywords: Paul Robeson, anti-communism, veterans, American Legion, fascism, Veterans of Foreign Wars

In December 1949, three months after two riots rocked Paul Robeson concerts in Peekskill, New York, the Civil Rights Congress filed a lawsuit against Peekskill police and veterans' organizations. The lawsuit alleged that the veterans and police violated the civil rights of Robeson and the people who attended the concerts. Robeson, author Howard Fast, and twenty-five other attendees were suing for \$2 million in damages for "personal injuries, property damage and deprivation of civil rights." Named in the lawsuit were the Peekskill district attorney, assistant district attorney, mayor, sheriff, and state police officials; the local commanders of the American Legion, Catholic War Veterans (CWV), Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and Jewish War Veterans (JWV); and the

chairmen of both the Veterans Joint Council (VJC) and Associated Veterans Council (AVC), two local umbrella organizations that incorporated different veterans' groups. Attorneys alleged that the riots, organized by veterans and abetted by law enforcement, violated the plaintiffs' Fourteenth Amendment rights and the Civil Rights Acts of 1870 and 1871.¹

Scholars have argued that the heightened "national atmosphere" caused by anti-communism during the Cold War fed into the 1949 riot. But vigilante violence and harassment against radicals and leftists by veterans' organizations predates this time. Veterans' groups have operated as political gatekeepers for as long as they have existed and have engaged in violence against their fellow Americans to police political boundaries according to their own ideas of patriotism, ideas that were in line with European fascism and US racism and xenophobia.²

The American Legion and other veterans' groups, in collaboration with law enforcement, used violence against their fellow Americans to defend the Cold War consensus and punish Black radical activism. These organizations deliberately targeted Paul Robeson and his concerts. Though the Peekskill incidents are the most famous, the Legion along with other veterans identified Robeson as a subversive threat and encouraged members to prevent and protest all his public appearances. The violence at the Peekskill concerts was not spontaneous protests but part of a larger conspiracy and an enactment of populist fascism to restrain Robeson's political radicalism and contain progressive gains under the guise of anti-communism.

Cold War anti-communism enabled anti-radical organizing and vilified progressive leaders like Robeson as communist threats. Robeson, who is not known to have joined the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), was nonetheless a fellow traveler, an anti-imperialist, and an advocate of socialism. More concerning for anti-communists, he openly admired the Soviet Union, traveled there, left his son to be educated there, and advocated its alternative economic structure. Though scholars have examined the Peekskill riots and their relationship to Paul Robeson's increased radicalism and his declining popularity, this article instead centers veterans' organizing against Robeson as intentional, and the violence as unexceptional. Cold War anti-communism empowered veterans' organizations to engage in a popular politics that can be described as populist fascism because it aimed to restrain their fellow citizens' rights, especially those of Black citizens, and because it sometimes erupted into violence. As the Peekskill riots show, law enforcement and the criminal legal system did little to prevent the violence against the Robeson concerts, and the rioters faced fewer punitive

1 "Robeson Group Asks 2 Million Riot Damages," *New York Herald Tribune*, December 16, 1949, MG 170, Paul Robeson Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, New York [hereafter SCRBC].

2 Scott Martelle, *The Fear Within: Spies, Commies, and American Democracy on Trial* (Rutgers University Press, 2011), 132–35.

consequences than alleged communists. Robeson was targeted because of anti-Black and anti-communist hysteria aimed at restraining progressive organizing.³ I argue that a fascist style of US anti-communism survived fascism's defeat in Europe in 1945, and that this anti-communism enabled popular political expression that likened progressive anti-racism to treason and encouraged populist fascism among those, including veterans' groups, who felt empowered to set the terms of Americanism. The Peekskill riots were not a unique chapter in vigilante violence against progressives and especially against a Black advocate for civil rights; rather, such violence is a throughline in the long history of veterans' organizations attacking social justice advocates, and it exemplifies a longer history of populist fascism in the United States.

Anti-Communism and Fascism

Joseph Fronczak has examined how scholars in France in the 1980s began exploring fascism not simply as state ideology but as a "form of political behavior, predominately a form of popular politics." Though fascism is most often identified with formal parties governing nation-states, Fronczak instead describes how citizens participate in the state's disciplinary mechanisms by surveilling radicals and penetrating radical organizations. They engage in censorship and violence, often with law enforcement blessing or participation, to prevent radical organizing and uphold corporate power.⁴

Fronczak's study specifically explores the conservative right wing in the Depression-era US as engaging with "transnational intellectual currents that coursed through the global Right." He challenges studies of fascism that look to whether it was "an accomplished fact in a given nation" and instead looks at how there was a "transnational transmission of political ideas" among grassroots organizations in the 1930s. He identifies important commonalities in the global right, including engaging in "popular politics" against leftists, which sometimes devolved into violence.⁵

3 Robeson was accused of being a "secret" Communist Party member, and the FBI was certain he was part of the CPUSA, claiming that he used the name "John Thomas." Because anti-communists and the FBI are the main source of any evidence that Robeson was a party member, we cannot assume that he was. Robeson usually refused to confirm or deny it, because, as Gerald Horne has argued, he tried to cover for his embattled communist comrades who did not have his public standing. In his memoirs, Robeson denied being a communist. See *Here I Stand* (Beason Press, 1988), 37–39. More importantly, anti-communists understood his anti-racism and anti-imperialism as subversive, and this led to marginalization and legal harassment during his lifetime, and to his erasure from popular histories of the Black freedom struggle even today. Undue emphasis on his alleged Communist Party membership remains a distraction. Gerald Horne, *Paul Robeson: The Artist as Revolutionary* (Pluto Press, 2016), 113, 127.

4 Joseph Fronczak, "The Fascist Game: Transnational Political Transmission and the Genesis of the U.S. Modern Right," *Journal of American History* 105, no. 3 (December 2018): 563, 565, 578, 585.

5 Fronczak, "Fascist Game," 564.

Federico Finchelstein has explored the differences and commonalities between populism and fascism. Primarily, he argues that they are transnational and not bound by borders, nor are they a phenomenon of the Global North. Twenty-first century populism, he argues, was “born out of fascism” and came from the “defeat of fascism” after World War II. By the end of the war, “populism had come to represent a continuation of fascism,” but it assimilated some democratic features, and according to Finchelstein, renounced some of the violence that had led to genocide. The post-Holocaust generation abhorred the excesses of Nazism, though not its anti-radicalism and authoritarianism. Populism had become a more democratic alternative that those with fascist sympathies could frame as an electorally viable choice, thus as something that appeared democratic.⁶

This article shows that what I call populist fascism—the grassroots organization against progressives and radicals that sometimes manifested in vigilante violence—did not disappear in 1945. Cold War anti-communism justified ongoing attacks against constitutional rights, legal efforts to discipline radicals and progressives, and among veterans’ organizations, the use of violence. Importantly, these vigilantes were servants of corporate power and often collaborated with business; anti-communism legitimized their (sometimes) extralegal actions. And as Finchelstein has shown, right-wing populism could mask deeds as democratic by linking radicalism to treason, and capitalism to democracy.

Progressives and radicals identified US anti-communism as an American form of fascism as it circumscribed their civil rights, expanded the surveillance state, selectively enforced constitutional rights, bolstered capitalist power, and silenced criticism of the national security state. Scholars do not agree on how long anti-labor activism has undergirded US politics, but many agree that it is pervasive, omnipresent, and unbounded by what has traditionally been labeled red scares. Anti-communism is rooted in the US’s xenophobic and racist past. Nick Fischer argues that precursors of twentieth-century anti-communism can be dated to the Reconstruction period, when anti-labor politics became a tool to police a disobedient underclass of free Blacks and working people, including recent immigrants. For Fischer, anti-communism and its antecedents justified “long-standing practices of labor exploitation and suppression of labor organizing” by blaming “foreign ideas and people.” Forcing people to labor in “intolerable conditions or for intolerable terms” was an idea that “survived slavery” and became a feature of American working life. Anti-communism has been deployed by government in collaboration with corporate interests and citizen groups, like veterans’ organizations. These organizations insisted that they could define appropriate citizenship and patriotism and punish radical leftists, especially Black radicals. For veterans’ organizations, democracy was identified with capitalism, and alternative

6 Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (University of California Press, 2017), xxxiii–xxxiv.

economic and labor structures were treasonous. Among these alternative economic structures was racial equality and integration.⁷

Charisse Burden-Stelly describes anti-communism's "durable mode of governance," which operated alongside anti-Blackness to circumscribe radical demands for social justice, link them to a "foreign" conspiratorial apparatus, and prevent the advancement of equality. Burden-Stelly argues that anti-communists believed they were committed to "True Americanism," dismissing those who rejected it as un-American. This True Americanism made democracy "reduced to and conflated with the 'American Way of Life,'" and "inextricable from free enterprise." Capitalism and corporate power became synonymous with Americanism and democracy, and those in the Black freedom struggle and labor movement who criticized capitalism were constructed as un-American. This politics "normalized" reactionary and regressive legislation, as well as "illiberal actions and practices of intolerance." Anti-communism centered anti-Blackness, which targeted Black Americans as foreigners disruptive of the body politic.⁸

Scholars have shown that the US was not a neutral observer of the rise of European fascist states; rather, its history of slavery, segregation, and genocide proved to be inspirational. The US role in the allied victory in World War II has served to blind Americans to fascist elements in the US and to commonalities between the US and the Axis powers. The word *fascism* was coined by Mussolini's Partito Nazionale Fascista (National Fascist Party) in the early 1920s, but, as Olivier Burtin argues, the politics it "describes could be found as early as mid-nineteenth century in the United States." Robert Paxton has defined fascism as a grievance politics obsessed with the notion of national decline engineered by others. This politics undergirds a unity among "nationalist militants" and "traditional elites," who are willing to abandon "democratic liberties" to pursue "redemptive violence . . . without ethical or legal restraints." Other scholars have expanded on this definition to describe fascism's preoccupation with and targeting of radical left politics. Erik McDuffie identifies several characteristics of fascism that include anti-communism and "hypernationalism." This hypernationalism pivots on the belief in a "fictive ideal past" to which the aggrieved group wants to return, ostensibly a time when people of color and women knew their proper roles at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy. Fascists have no respect for human rights and are devoted to xenophobia and militarism. They launch attacks on media, invoke religion, provide unqualified support for "corporate power" against working people, and

7 Nick Fischer, *Spider Web: The Birth of American Anticommunism* (University of Illinois Press, 2016), 1–2.

8 Charisse Burden-Stelly, *Black Scare / Red Scare: Theorizing Capitalist Racism in the United States* (University of Chicago Press, 2023), 149, 165, 226–27.

demonstrate an “obsession” with law and order while excusing their own or their ally’s extralegal activity.⁹

Fascists also claim to speak for the people and, as Finchelstein has explored, have operated in tandem with populist politics. The Nazi’s used populist rhetoric to claim they were of the people, but they also rejected politics that expanded the rights and privileges of the people. This included “social democracy[,] . . . class-oriented collective organization[,] . . . redistributive, welfarism and socially egalitarian cultural improvement.” German fascists, like those in the US, were invested in anti-communism and were guilty of “recklessly conflating” all those in support of representative government as “*anti-nation*.”¹⁰ In the US, that became “un-American.”

Scholars should also take seriously the accusations of those targeted during the Cold War, who often understood their antagonists as fascist. As Fronczak has argued, “antifascist sources are especially illuminating for the study of fascism” because scholars can see “the extent to which the understanding of fascism as practice surpassed views of fascism as an identity and fascism as an ideology.”¹¹ Before and after World War II, Black radicals recognized their own experience in the United States as similar to the treatment of racial and national minorities in fascist states. Those who had experienced imperialism and colonialism did not view fascist terror as unique or new. As Sarah Dunstan has shown, Black diasporic intellectuals ascribed Nazi brutality and genocide not to a “particular peculiarity of Germany’s Third Reich” but to a “flaw at the heart of Western Civilization.” Important thinkers such as W. E. B. Du Bois had long described European colonialism and US racism as fascist. He viewed the Nazi holocaust as not anomalous but part of the “fault lines” of Western liberal democracies.¹² Scholars have argued that the experience of people of color needs to be understood as what Alberto Toscano has called “racial fascism.” For Toscano, the Black radical critique of right-wing authoritarianism offers a crucial resource for considering the question of US fascism.

9 Olivier Burtin, “State of the Field: Fascism Has an American History, Too,” *Reviews in American History* 49, no. 3 (2021): 495–96; Erik McDuffie, “For a New Anti-Fascist, Anti-Imperialist People’s Coalition: Claudia Jones, Black Left Feminism, and the Politics of Possibility in the Era of Trump,” in *Post-Cold War Revelations and the American Communist Party*, ed. Vernon L. Pedersen, James G. Ryan, and Katherine A. S. Sibley (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 196–97. Adolf Hitler and other Nazis officials took inspiration from the US model, especially its xenophobic legislation and eugenics movement. Hitler also admired the genocide of indigenous people. See James Whitman, *Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

10 Geoff Eley, “Conservatives—Radical Nationalists—Fascists: Calling the People into Politics, 1890–1930” in *Transformations of Populism in Europe and the Americas: History and Recent Tendencies*, ed. John Abromeit, Briget Maria Chesterton, Gary Marotta, and York Norman (Bloomsbury, 2016), 19 (original italics).

11 Fronczak, “Fascist Game,” 579.

12 Sarah Dunstan, *Race, Rights, and Reform: Black Activism in the French Empire and the United States from World War I to the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 190–91.

And thus it should not be dismissed as hyperbole when the harassed and harangued activists identified as fascist those whose mission was to silence them.¹³ In this sense, anti-communism was a continuation of fascism: Robeson and his colleagues were stalked by government agents as well as fellow citizens, faced legal harassment, and in Robeson's case, suffered violent assault from veterans' organizations.

American Fascism

Burtin argues that we need to consider the Ku Klux Klan as a manifestation of fascism, and that doing so "suggests a new chronology" of fascist history that does not begin with Mussolini. After Reconstruction, white supremacist vigilantes emerged to contain Black citizenship rights and prevent economic advancement. Scholars have shown that anti-radicalism emerged simultaneously, thus the histories of popular anti-Black and anti-labor violence should be explored as related phenomena. Doing so suggests a throughline linking popular politics, anti-communism, and fascism. Burtin argues this is when US fascism burst onto the political stage: "[W]hite supremacist militias . . . helped [to] overthrow Reconstruction," and they used vigilante violence to police their fellow Americans.¹⁴ Two historiographic traditions, one on fascism in the US and the other on anti-communism, show that these emerged simultaneously to suppress progressive gains.

The second emergence of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) after 1915 was invested in setting the "meaning of Americanism and un-Americanism," and the Klan believed that it "represented the finest tradition of Americanism." Though the Klan of the early twentieth century became mainstream in many places, it still engaged in vigilante violence, and much of it targeted social justice organizing. Michael Cohen has shown that the KKK targeted the interracial International Workers of the World (IWW), known as Wobblies, because it advocated anti-racism and challenged capitalism. The Klan was not simply a racist organization: It used vigilante violence to suppress worker's organization. Cohen argues that the KKK along with the American Legion engaged in extralegal violence but still "earned a measure of state legitimacy by participating in nationally orchestrated antiradical purges." He also observes that "America's disciplinary regime," since the end of the Civil War, "comprised a decentralized and hybrid system of private security firms, vigilantism, and state policing institutions."¹⁵

13 Alberto Toscano, "Incipient Fascism: Black Radical Perspectives," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 23, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.4015>

14 Burtin, "State of the Field," 496–97.

15 George Lewis, "An Amorphous Code: The Ku Klux Klan and Un-Americanism, 1915–1965," *Journal of American Studies* 47, no. 4 (2013): 972; Michael Cohen, "'The Ku Klux Government': Vigilantism, Lynching, and the Repression of the IWW," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 1, no. 1 (2006): 32.

After World War I, some within the KKK rebranded themselves as fascist. During the 1930s, Klan members worked with fascist organizations in the United States. As George Lewis has shown, there were some in the Klan who were eager to work with fascists, and there had been at one point an effort to work with the American Bund, a pro-Nazi organization. Though not all Klansmen agreed with this partnership as it centered a pro-German attitude, many Klansmen saw an affinity with the group, and they continued to emphasize their own right to define Americanism. As Lewis has shown, the Klan would spend decades claiming that it was a paragon of Americanism, and anything linked to social justice was “un-American.”¹⁶

The KKK was a significant vigilante organization during the post-World War I years, but Cohen argues that it was the American Legion that became the “most significant vigilante organization to emerge after the armistice.” Created by World War I veterans, the Legion entered the debate over how to define Americanism, and as Black radicals in the IWW observed, it was the “physical arm of capital, organized to beat up and destroy the labor movement.” This kind of “terrorism of the workers,” one IWW activist observed in 1920, “is the normal condition.” Cohen argues that Black intellectuals in the 1920s “came closer than any other political thinkers . . . to formulating a theory of what would, by [Mussolini’s rise to power in] 1922, be clearly labeled fascism.” Alec Campbell has shown that the Legion was not a spontaneous organization: Its founders came from the pre-World War I preparedness movement and at its founding expected “to take part in conflicts over class and between classes.” It was not, therefore, an apolitical organization but a group devoted to being a “bulwark against an increasingly organized and radical working class.” And it “succeeded beyond their wildest dreams,” becoming “the leading anti-radical organization in the United States.”¹⁷

In one of its earliest and most significant actions, the American Legion in Centralia, Washington, planned and participated in a violent attack against an IWW Hall in 1919 as a “practical exercise in patriotism.” Legion members participated in a violent gunfight at the Wobblies meeting hall, ran down and beat World War I veteran and Wobbly Wesley Everest, and then the next day lynched him. All this was done alongside law enforcement, and while Legionnaires were killed during the assault, the American Legion had begun the violence. It was the third time they had raided the hall.¹⁸

Veterans’ organizations were early admirers of European fascists. Richard Steigmann-Gall has demonstrated this link in the life of Alvin Owsley, the national commander of the American Legion between 1922 and 1923. Owsley identified “Soviets, anarchists, I.W.W.s, revolutionary socialists and ‘red[s],’” as a danger to the US. Steigmann-Gall noted his admiration for Italian fascists in their suppression of radicals, and Owsley

16 Lewis, “Amorphous Code,” 980.

17 Cohen, “Ku Klux Government,” 46–47; Alec Campbell, “The Sociopolitical Origins of the American Legion,” *Theory and Society* 39, no. 1 (2010): 1, 22.

18 Cohen, “Ku Klux Government,” 46–47.

was quoted as saying “that the Fascisti are to Italy what the American Legion are to the United States.” He admired Mussolini and invited him to speak at the Legion’s 1922 convention. This was not isolated—the Legion extended invitations to Mussolini to speak well into the 1930s. In 1931, the Legion passed a resolution of support for Mussolini and, in 1935, Mussolini was made an honorary member of the group.¹⁹

Despite the claim of veterans’ groups to preserve US democracy and liberty, their goal was to enforce a racially specific citizenry obedient to the capitalist political order, and they tolerated no dissent. To do so, some pursued fascist revolution. Smedley Butler, a retired Marines Corps general, revealed to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) that in 1934 he had been approached by a Wall Street broker to lead a revolutionary force to overthrow Franklin Roosevelt’s government and usher in a fascist dictatorship. The uprising would be funded by Wall Street interests, and Butler was presented with \$18,000 to “take care of his expenses.” The VFW national commander James Van Zandt and the American Legion national commander Frank Belgrano were both planned participants. The conspirators were never punished. In fact, HUAC, under the direction of Congressman Martin Dies, had borrowed its understanding of “Un-Americanism” from the American Legion, the VFW, and the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). The American Legion had formally requested the government create such a committee to investigate “Un-American” activities.²⁰

In 1938, educator and former Legionnaire William Gellerman warned that the group was “Fascist and unpatriotic” and that it engaged in reactionary politics at the behest of the “privileged classes.” He wrote that the Legion was wholly devoted to the maintenance and preservation of capitalism and that it brooked no criticism of that system. The Legion had from its beginning invested in creating its own narrative of World War I and of US history more generally, producing a US history textbook in 1926. George Lewis has shown that the Legion wanted to control how US history was being taught in public schools, with “its own favored definition of Americanism.”²¹ The Legion dismissed Gellerman’s criticisms as an “obvious libel” coming from a “communist brain-child” and an “incubator of communism.” Well into the 1950s, the American Legion magazine featured stories about how educators were brainwashing

19 Richard Steigmann-Gall, “Star Spangled Fascism: American Interwar Political Extremism in Comparative Perspective,” *Social History* 42, no. 1 (2017): 94–95; Cohn, “Ku Klux Government,” 46.

20 Fronczak, “Fascist Game,” 564–65; “Gen. Butler Bares ‘Fascist Plot’ to Seize Government by Force,” *New York Times*, November 21, 1934, 1; Lewis, “Amorphous Code,” 973; Justin Gray, “The Legion’s Americanism,” *New Republic*, July 19, 1948, 19.

21 William MacDonald, “A Study of the American Legion,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1938, 86; “Survey Brands Legion as Fascist and Urges Educators to Fight It,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1938, 1; Gray, “Legion’s Americanism,” 19; George Lewis, “The Curation of American Patriotism: The American Legion and the Story of Our American People,” *History & Memory* 35, no. 2 (2023): 80; William Gellerman, *The American Legion as Educator* (Bureau of Publications, 1938), 264–66.

students with communist propaganda, which they often defined as promoting tolerance and racial and economic equality.²²

More concerning were the Legion's relations with federal law enforcement. As the Centralia incident showed, Legion members collaborated with law enforcement in their vigilantism, but they were not confined to local agencies. Cohen has argued that the Legion and other groups became "semilegitimized national vigilante organizations" used against labor and other social justice organizations, which aided in the "building of the modern American political intelligence apparatus." In 1940, the FBI created the American Legion Contact Program to use Legionnaires as informants and civilian agents to "monitor dissent and ensure internal order." Athan Theoharis has argued that this program, which continued until 1966, demonstrates that the Bureau was motivated not by national security interests but by "conservative ideology." It allowed the Bureau to act independently and expand its own power without other government agencies knowing about it; during its existence, Congress was never made aware of the program. It came from the Legion itself, which proposed to Attorney General Robert Jackson that its chapters could monitor subversive activities. Jackson initially rejected the idea, but FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover negotiated with him to secure permission. Hoover wanted to cultivate members as "Confidential National Defense Informants." During World War II, the Bureau used tens of thousands of Legionnaires to collect information, especially on unions in wartime industries.²³

Burtin reasons that significant segregation and police brutality survived well past the supposed defeat of fascism; this means that fascism is not a "distant evil relegated to the past" but "the always present underside of liberal democracy."²⁴ And veterans' organizations did not abandon their vigilantism and targeting of social justice advocates after the defeat of Italian and German fascists. Cold War anti-communism enabled populist fascism by criminalizing dissent, targeting radicals as subversive, and linking progressive goals to a foreign conspiracy. Though the exigencies of wartime security expired in 1945, Hoover extended the Legion Contact Program, which engendered good relations between the Bureau and the American Legion. Hoover ordered the Contact Program paperwork destroyed in the mid-1950s, so it is unclear the extent of the surveillance, but throughout the Cold War the Bureau maintained an official liaison with the Legion, who collected information on "subversive elements" and discouraged the Legion's support of questionable national leaders. The Legion national commander in 1948, James O'Neil, claimed that the organization was part of a network in which

22 MacDonald, "Study of the American Legion"; "Survey Brands Legion as Fascist and Urges Educators to Fight It," *New York Times*, June 27, 1938, 1; Gellerman, *American Legion as Educator*, 264–66.

23 Cohen, "Ku Klux Government," 49; Athan Theoharis, "The FBI and the American Legion Contact Program, 1940–1966," *Political Science Quarterly* 100, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 273–75.

24 Burtin, "State of the Field," 496–97.

the FBI conducted “actual official investigation,” HUAC worked on “exposure,” and the Legion acted as an “unofficial advisory committee.”²⁵

O’Neil lauded the Legion’s close relationship with the Bureau in the pages of its magazine. In a 1948 article he sought to instruct the membership to “fight Communism.” He noted that around the US were “former FBI men, Army or Navy intelligence officers,” former CPUSA members that had “come over to our side,” and others skilled in routing out communists, and “many of them are Legionnaires.” He advised Legion posts to create local committees with these individuals who could “check on the credibility” of other anti-communists. O’Neil praised the work of HUAC and urged the advisory committees to work with state legislatures to bring un-American committees to their communities. He also instructed the membership to organize against the appearance of any “pro-Soviet apologist” appearing in their cities and towns. Though he did reject “strong arm methods,” the inflammatory tone of the article could only increase the anxiety of the Legionnaires. He described communists as those hiding behind “progressive” politics, who were trained for years in propaganda and trickery, and were effectively a “secret battalion of spies and saboteurs parachuted by a foreign foe” and “operating as American citizens.” He counseled that if the communists can “indoctrinate, control and activate” their “dupes and camp followers,” the Legion could in turn “arouse, warn, and instruct” its millions of members to fight communism on their turf.²⁶

Paul Robeson became a special target of the Legion and was featured several times in the Legion’s magazine. Months before the Peekskill riots, Richard Combs, the chief counsel of the California Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities, published an article titled “How Communists Make Stooges out of Movie Stars.” An image of Robeson standing next to socialist congressmen Vito Marcantonio and Leo Isaacson appeared with the article. The caption read, “The film colony is very tolerant of Paul Robeson’s consistent devotion to Moscow.” The article then went on to list subversive organizations and Robeson’s membership in some of them, including the American League for Peace and Democracy, Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, American Peace Mobilization, Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, and the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee. Combs described “racial and religious intolerance, discrimination, poor housing, crooked politicians, and unemployment” in films as subtle

25 Theoharis, “American Legion Contact Program,” 280; Gray, “Legion’s Americanism,” 19; John Sbardellati and Tony Shaw, “Booting a Tramp: Charlie Chaplin, the FBI, and the Construction of the Subversive Image in Red Scare America,” *Pacific Historical Review* 72, no. 4 (2003): 511–12; James F. O’Neil, “How You Can Fight Communism,” in *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents*, 2nd ed., ed. Ellen Shrecker (Bedford St. Martins, 2002), 122–25.

26 O’Neil, “You Can Fight Communism.”

communist propaganda.²⁷ Even after the violence at Peekskill, the Legion newspaper would continue to single Robeson out as a threat to the US body politic.

This article shows that populist fascism did not disappear after World War II and the defeat of European fascism. Instead, it manifested in anti-communism, which emboldened veterans' organizations to discipline their fellow Americans who did not meet their standards of Americanism. Reactionaries in veterans' organizations have regularly attacked their fellow citizens, in the Depression era and beyond—a history exemplified by the Peekskill riots.

Anti-Robeson Organizing

An accomplished artist and athlete, Robeson could have settled into the comforts of celebrity but instead used his public image to support the Black freedom struggle and labor organizing; as a result, he became a target of those that defined Americanism based on exclusion, rigid expectations of obedience, and class, race, and gender hierarchy. In their attempts to silence Robeson and condemn him as a subversive, veterans deployed populist fascist techniques of censorship and vigilante violence. They claimed to be the final arbiters of Americanism, but in the process they violated the constitutional rights of their fellow citizens and used violence to silence others.

Robeson was an internationalist: He understood the struggles of Black America were connected to the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. He was also an anti-capitalist who abhorred the exploitation of Black and working Americans and of nations of color struggling for independence from Western states and capitalist interests. He admired both the Soviet Union and China for their commitment to radical liberation, he denounced Cold War anti-communism and advocated for a peace centered in social justice, and he participated in organizations that sought global liberation. He also worked with several organizations with links to the CPUSA, including the Civil Rights Congress (CRC). Though he was presumably never a CPUSA member himself, that was of little consequence because it was widely assumed he was. In the United States of the 1940s, liberatory politics smacked of communism to law enforcement and the public, proving that anti-communism does not require the presence of communists.

Veterans' groups organized against Paul Robeson long before the Peekskill incident. Grassroots efforts against him were launched early in the Cold War and became a barrier to both his career and activism. In April 1947, Robeson was scheduled to perform in Peoria, Illinois, but the local American Legion immediately organized against his appearance. Peter Cole and Ricky Newcomb argue that this event, two years before the

27 Richard E. Combs, "How Communists Make Stooges Out of Movie Stars," *American Legion Magazine*, May 1949, 14–15, 43–44.

Peekskill riots, “shaped and predicted the subsequent destruction” of his career, and that the incident “revealed and epitomized the nation’s political fault lines” in the early Cold War.²⁸

The Peoria American Legion was segregated, and only the white branch organized against Robeson’s appearance. The Black Legionnaires claimed they did not agree with Robeson’s politics but supported his right to perform. Meanwhile, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) “distanced itself” from the event, presaging the group’s anti-communist commitments and the liberal abandonment of its radical allies. The NAACP and its leaders were some of the most vocal critics of Robeson and other Black radicals. As Manfred Berg has argued, the organization chose accommodation to anti-communism and “fervently denied all charges that it was dominated by Communists,” as Southern segregationists and the FBI believed. In these years it was not unusual for liberal organizations to distance themselves from Robeson, which makes the Black Legionnaires defense of his right to appear significant.²⁹

The FBI was alerted to the event by a local informant who “consulted” the local American Legion. The informant told the FBI that Robeson was banned from using a local mosque, so the mayor offered a room in city hall so as not to appear to censor his freedom of speech. But the informant worried that the appearance would upset “loyal Americans.”³⁰ Under pressure from locals and the city council, the mayor had to reverse his decision. Clifford Hazelwood, the leader of the segregated American Legion branch (named the Roy B. Tisdell post), appealed to his congressional representative, Everett Dirksen, who forwarded his concerns to the FBI. Hazelwood, also a leader in the local NAACP, was concerned about the ensuing controversy, and he asked Dirksen to confirm what information the Bureau had on Robeson and his alleged un-Americanism. Hazelwood believed that even if Robeson were a communist, he still retained the constitutional right to freedom of speech. Though Robeson was barred from city hall, he did perform at a local Peoria unionist’s home and vowed to return despite “Peoria Fascism.”³¹

28 Peter Cole and Ricky Newcomb, “Can’t Play in Peoria: Paul Robeson’s Canceled Concert, Civil Rights Unionism, and the Second Red Scare,” *Journal of African American History* 107, no. 4 (2022): 550.

29 Cole and Newcomb, “Can’t Play in Peoria,” 550, 559; Manfred Berg, “Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War,” *Journal of American History* 94, no. 1 (2007): 76.

30 Cole and Newcomb, “Can’t Play in Peoria,” 550, 559; redacted informant name to J. Edgar Hoover, April 18, 1947, 73, FBI HQ file, 100-12304, section 2, Paul Robeson Sr. FBI File.

31 Director FBI to Attorney General, May 3, 1947, 79; Everett Dirksen to J. Edgar Hoover, May 6, 1947, 81; redacted informant to Everett Dirksen, April 24, 1947, 82–83, FBI HQ file, 100-12304, section 2, Paul Robeson Sr. FBI File. Conservative media praised the American Legion for organizing against Robeson’s concert. Anti-communist journalist George Sokolsky wrote in his nationally

The Peoria incident set off a conflict between the segregated posts. The white American Legionnaires tried to influence the Tisdell members to condemn Robeson. Five of the Black Legion members agreed to sign a statement condemning Robeson, but the membership rebelled and retracted the five members' support. The Tisdell post then issued a statement that did not support Robeson but did support his right to freedom of speech. In response, the Illinois state American Legion commander revoked the Tisdell charter, confiscated the group's material, and padlocked its building. Hazelwood was then accused of being a communist and had to face a trial before the state American Legion. The American Legion Illinois state executive committee voted unanimously to revoke the Roy B. Tisdell charter. The white veterans had turned on their fellow veterans and chose to punish them for standing up for the First Amendment. Two weeks later in Albany, New York, Robeson won an injunction that allowed him to perform after locals tried to stop his event. A local city counselor protested the event, not because of the "color of Paul Robeson's skin," he claimed, but because of the "color of his ideologies."³²

And so it went for Robeson in the years and months leading up to the Peekskill riots. Some of his concerts and speaking engagements were cancelled, lost their secured venues, or were picketed by veterans' groups. In January 1948, Robeson was scheduled to perform at an event in Gary, Indiana, at a school facility. The school district was forced to withdraw permission to use the building after protests by Harold E. Morris, the Indiana state commander of the American Legion, along with representatives from the DAR and the first district American Legion Auxiliary.³³

In 1948, Robeson supported the Henry Wallace campaign for president. He appeared on stage at selected events. The Wallace campaign complained that they were not given radio time and that newspapers described Wallace as a Soviet sympathizer, ignoring his campaign platform. Robeson planned to return to Indiana with Wallace and appear at his Evansville and Indianapolis events, but the venues were controlled by veterans. The Evansville event was scheduled to take place in the Veterans Memorial Coliseum and in Indianapolis at the National Guard Armory; General Howard Maxwell oversaw both venues, and he barred Robeson from appearing at either event. Maxwell eventually relented, but in Evansville, local conflicts between radical unionists and anti-

syndicated column that the concert was canceled because of the Legion's protests to the Peoria city council. Sokolsky also concluded that because Robeson was a Soviet "propagandist" he could not complain that being a Black man influenced the cancellation. George Sokolsky, "These Days," May 1947, 23, FBI HQ file, 100-12304, section 2, Paul Robeson Sr. FBI File.

32 Clifford Hazelwood to J. Edgar Hoover, September 12, 1947, 25; Curtis Cavitt to J. Edgar Hoover, September 6, 1947, 27-32, FBI HQ file, 100-12304, section 2, Paul Robeson Sr. FBI File; "Legion Chiefs Vote Out Post for Communism," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 15, 1947, 12; "Ban on Robeson Studied by Court," *New York Times*, May 3, 1947, 10; "Paul Robeson Wins Injunction to Sing in New York School Hall," *New York Times*, May 7, 1947, 29.

33 "School Officials in Gary Deny Use of Auditorium for Program Featuring Paul Robeson, Singer," *Rushville (IN) Republican*, January 10, 1948, 1.

communists and veterans' groups led to vociferous opposition to Robeson appearing. He was replaced by another performer. Veterans engaged in a riot at the Evansville event.³⁴

The violence meted out by veterans' groups did not go unnoticed or uncriticized. Harry Truman, whose own anti-communist policies were targeted by radicals as fascist and who red-baited Wallace, believed the American Legion had "fascist potentialities." In 1948, former director of the Legion's Americanism Commission Justin Gray wrote several articles for the *New Republic* on the Legion's authoritarian tactics. He described a meeting in which the 1946 national commander, John Griffith, claimed that communism had been a part of American history since Jamestown. According to Gray, when Griffith stated that the communist experiment in Jamestown ended in failure and the men ate all the women, no one challenged his outrageous claims. It was not the only wild claim at that meeting; one attendee believed a college professor was a communist because he had been seen walking with a Black man. This laid bare the conservative belief that civil rights advocacy and integration were communist conspiracies and that Black aspirations for freedom were un-American. Gray concluded that the American Legion was "the greatest single organized menace to democracy in the United States." He believed that the Legion was masking its fascist intent behind the "guise of anti-communism."³⁵

Gray revealed that the American Legion very liberally used the "Red brush" to accuse individuals of being communist, and that the Legion maintained a "subversive activities" file, which focused primarily on "Communist, Socialist, pacifist, [and] religious" groups. The file also included an ongoing list of individuals the group believed were subversive; to make it onto the list required very little, and the charges were not investigated. Much of the information came from Legionnaires who sent in their accusations, though some of it was shared by the FBI and HUAC, demonstrating that the relationship between the Legion and government bodies went both ways.³⁶

Few right-wing reactionary groups were in the files, and Gray noted that some, like the Ku Klux Klan, were praised. He reported that Legion leaders had friendly relations with "ultra-reactionaries" throughout the country, including avowed fascists. The head of the American Vigilante Committee, Harry Jung, who had been praised by the Nazi regime in the 1930s, shared information with the Legion, and it shared information with him. The American Vigilante Committee had connections to individuals in the fascist Silver Shirts and the "Nazi-inspired" Knights of the White Camelia, and to outspoken antisemite Elizabeth Dilling. Gray warned that the Legion could become a

34 Denise Lynn, "Native Fascism: Evansville's 1948 Wallace Riot," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 119, no. 3 (2023): 233–63.

35 Burtin, "State of the Field," 498; Gray, "Legion's Americanism," 19.

36 Gray, "Legion's Americanism," 20; Sbardellati and Shaw, "Booting a Tramp," 503, 511.

fascist threat in the US if it was allowed to continue as it was. But continue it did—its leadership and members, along with other veterans' groups, organized against Robeson and sparked the conflagration that led to the Peekskill violence.³⁷

Peekskill Riots

Gray accused the American Legion leadership of allying with fascists and federal agencies to violate the civil rights of their fellow Americans. But it was the Legion's membership in local posts, its allies in other veterans' groups, and anti-communist veterans in unions that organized against Robeson. This populist fascism did not always turn into violence, but it did intend to silence those who did not conform to a rigid understanding of Americanism. Understanding these actions as populist fascism highlights what scholars have articulated—that the US has been both a progenitor of and participant in fascism. As important, Robeson and his contemporaries understood the veterans' violence and the suppression of their freedom of speech as fascist.

Some of the troubles that plagued Robeson in the immediate postwar years only increased in 1949. On April 20, Robeson was a featured speaker at the Congress for the Partisans of Peace conference in Paris, France. During his speech he denounced war with the Soviet Union, and he was quoted in the US press as saying that “it would be unthinkable for US Negroes to join in war mania against Moscow.” Robeson and his allies had often denounced the growing US war machine and its use of Black troops against nations of color. He was not alone in saying that Black Americans should not fight in US colonial wars; his friends Claudia Jones and W. E. B. Du Bois had said the same things. Gerald Horne argues that whatever he said, it was misquoted in the US press and the response was “volcanic, stoking more fury.” The furor led to condemnations from leading Black liberals, including NAACP leader Walter White, and prompted HUAC hearings about Robeson's “disloyal and unpatriotic statements.” After the incident, the VFW committed to picketing his appearances.³⁸

The already fiery hostility that Robeson faced was fueled further by the HUAC hearings. The hearings' very existence branded Robeson a traitor; those who testified merely became tools in the authoritarian apparatus determined to punish him. Former communist Manning Johnson described Robeson to the committee as a wannabe “Black Stalin,” who “harbored grand delusions.” Joseph Dorinson argues that the Robeson

37 Gray, “Legion's Americanism,” 21.

38 Horne, *Paul Robeson*, 114–15, 221; Denise Lynn, “Shirley Graham Du Bois, Claudia Jones, and the Liberatory Potential of Peace,” in “In Battle for Peace,” ed. Denise Lynn and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, special issue, *American Communist History* 21, nos. 3–4 (2022): 187–99; Robbie Lieberman, *The Strangest Dream: Communism, Anticommunism and the US Peace Movement, 1945–1963* (Syracuse University, 2000), 73; Martelle, *Fear Within*, 193.

hearings demonstrated a racial double standard: White witnesses only had to quietly inform on others to be considered redeemed, whereas Black witnesses were expected to publicly denounce Robeson. The committee's "knock-out-blow" was to call Jackie Robinson as a witness. Robeson had worked hard to help integrate professional baseball, and calling Robinson was viewed as a personal attack. Robinson made a statement that did not condemn Robeson but did describe his comments as ridiculous. Robeson's response was tepid. Refusing to be baited and attack Robinson, he defended his right to free speech and pointed out that the HUAC committee chair had defended the KKK. The furor led to eighty of his booked appearances being cancelled.³⁹ Robinson's appearance before HUAC was on July 18; Robeson was scheduled to appear in Peekskill on August 27. Peekskill's veterans' groups were preparing to confront Robeson and his fans.⁴⁰

The Peekskill concerts were one of several fundraisers during the Smith Act trials of the CPUSA leadership to pay for their defense. The communist leaders were accused of conspiring to violently overthrow the US government. Peekskill lay forty miles north of New York City, in Westchester County. It was an unremarkable town whose rural character was maintained through force of the will by the residents. In a report on the riots, Peekskill was described as politically "monolithic," economically depressed, and expecting "unquestioned conformity." It might appear an unusual location for a CRC fundraising event except for its substantial "summer colonists."⁴¹ Much of the town's income derived from its summer residents, almost twice the number of locals. Many of the summer colonists were "Jewish traders, lawyers[,] and doctors," and some "small manufacturers or skilled workers," from New York City. According to a report from the American Civil Liberties Union, a "Communist summer colony" was established in the nearby town of Beacon, and a "Socialist summer colony" in Shrub Oak. These two groups had substantial political differences between them and made "little attempt" to influence Peekskill's politics. Robeson had performed in Peekskill in the past without incident; the August appearance would be his fourth. It was hosted by People's Artists Inc. at the Lakeland Acres picnic ground, which was not in Peekskill but nearby Cortlandt. And it was on private property, despite claims it was a public park.⁴²

39 Horne, *Paul Robeson*, 114–15, 117; Joseph Dorinson, "Paul Robeson and Jackie Robinson: Athletes and Activists at Armageddon," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 66, no. 1 (1999): 19–20; "Singer Paul Robeson Would Become 'Black Stalin,' Ex-Red Declares," *Kilgore News Herald* (Henderson, TX), July 17, 1949, 21.

40 Horne, *Paul Robeson*, 120; Martelle, *Fear Within*, 193.

41 American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), *Violence in Peekskill: A Report of the Violations of Civil Liberties at Two Paul Robeson Concerts near Peekskill, N.Y., August 27 and September 4, 1949*, 5–6, box 98, vol. 135, Civil Rights Congress Papers, SCRBC.

42 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 7, 10; Westchester Committee for a Fair Inquiry into the Peekskill Violence (WCFIPV), "Eyewitness: Peekskill USA," 1949, box 15, a306, Civil Rights Congress Papers,

Reports suggested that Peekskill residents had lost patience with the summer residents and that this, along with the local press's provocations, had inflamed the locals. But the later lawsuit recognized a larger trend across the country—a conspiracy of local veterans' organizations and law enforcement to prevent Robeson's appearances and "deprive the gatherers of rights to free speech and assembly." In other words, the Peekskill riots were not anomalous, they were just more violent. In an August 18 issue of the local newspaper, the *Peekskill Evening Star*, Vincent Boyle, the commander of the local Verplanck post of the American Legion and chairman of the Associated Veterans' Group, wrote a letter recommending that local veterans' groups "cooperate" to "vehemently oppose" the concert and leave Robeson and the attendees with "little doubt that they are unwelcome around here." Though he claimed he did not want violence, he referred to an event twenty years prior when local Irish Catholics engaged in a "bloody encounter" that drove the KKK out of Peekskill; he recommended that the veterans do the same.⁴³

The August 23 edition of the newspaper contained protests against the concert from the Chamber of Commerce and the Cortlandt town supervisor. In addition, it announced a meeting to discuss the concert called by Assistant County District Attorney Leonard Rubinfeld, who was also the chairman of the Joint Veterans' Council (JVC), which represented the American Legion, VFW, CWV, and JWV. The Verplanck American Legion announced it planned to picket the concert and asked the cooperation of veterans in "neighboring town posts" to join. The JVC called for its members to join the pickets and encouraged "peaceful demonstrations . . . in contrast to the force and violence as practiced in communistic and dictatorship countries."⁴⁴

Boyle's letter to the editor has been credited with inflaming the locals' passions and arousing concern among some that violence was on the horizon. On August 24, a group of Peekskill locals sent a telegram to the state attorney general, county executive, and district attorney urging an investigation into Boyle's statements and asking for protection for the concert. The attorney general referred it to the county DA, who then sent it to local law enforcement, which advised that they did not expect violence but would be on hand regardless. In the August 25 issue of the *Evening Star*, an "[a]ngry veterans' spokesman" announced a picket outside the concert and another veterans' group was reported to be planning a separate parade.⁴⁵

SCRBC; Howard Fast, *Peekskill, USA: Inside the Infamous 1949 Riots* (Open Road Media, 2011), 11. The book is a reprint from Fast's 1952 text. Fast was the host of the Peekskill event.

43 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 6, 7, 10, 13; WCFIPV, "Eyewitness," 6; *Robeson v. Fanelli*, 94 F. Supp. 62 (S.D.N.Y. 1950).

44 WCFIPV, "Eyewitness," 7.

45 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 14; WCFIPV, "Eyewitness," 7; "Robeson Dares Mob to Strike 2nd time," 1949, box 15, a306, Civil Rights Congress Papers, SCRBC.

The day before the concert, the *Evening Star* featured op-eds that rejected communism but agreed that the concert should go on and locals should respect freedom of speech. One of the opinion writers, Mary Mobile, received a prank phone call calling her a “dirty red bitch” and warning her to leave town. Over the next several days she received several other calls; one told her that “the men in the Legion are out to get you.” The locals were so inflamed that the *Evening Star* ran a front-page story rejecting the very anger it had helped whip up days before.⁴⁶

Author Howard Fast was chairman of the concert, and he planned to bring his daughter Rachel, six years old at the time, because she liked to hear Robeson sing. A representative of People’s Artists Inc. came to Fast’s rental home the morning of the planned concert to warn him that the “American Legion is going to march,” and that some of the local men had been “liquoring themselves up” in anticipation. Fast read the local newspaper conversations on the concert but did not believe that violence would ensue; nevertheless, he decided to leave his daughter at home.⁴⁷

Fast arrived at the picnic grounds an hour before he was meant to. There was already traffic from both the protestors and the concertgoers, and he described an “unruly crowd of men” at the concert entrance intimidating a group of teenage volunteer ushers. The event organizers were blocked from entering, but Fast made it inside along with several unionists who had arrived early from nearby homes and local families with children setting up picnics. A young man alerted them to trouble, and Fast and the group of men followed him to see that hundreds more men had arrived and were blocking the entrance with “billies and brass knucks and rocks in clenched fists, and American Legion caps.” The anti-Robeson crowd was growing and filled the road leading up to the picnic grounds. Protestors had set up a barrier across the road using a Legion truck; Fast described them as a “solid mass of the American Legion.” The men attacked Fast, and his comrades were temporarily beaten back when they noticed “three miserable” deputy sheriffs nearby. One of the men in the mob told the police to “give us five minutes and we’ll murder the n----- bastards.” Fast observed that the “Legion caps” were on respectable middle-aged men and “not boys,” contrary to later press reports.⁴⁸

The police insisted that it was Fast and company causing trouble. He asked them to clear the road so they could get on with their event, but the police claimed they were powerless to stop the mob and told him, “Just cut out the trouble. . . . [W]e don’t want no troublemakers.” For the next two hours only the three sheriffs were left to try to allay the “fascists,” as Fast described them. The mob attacked again, telling them, “No one of you leave here alive,” and injuring four of the group with Fast. Another group of the “fascists” went inside the picnic grounds and attacked the women and children.

46 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 15–16.

47 Fast, *Peekskill*, 12–13.

48 Fast, *Peekskill*, 16–20, 22.

The attacks continued as Fast and his allies tried to evacuate the children and create a barrier. At some point part of the mob erected a burning cross inside the park and continued to attack the families within. Fast and the others had been pushed back to the stage area, where they created a barrier around the women and children; meanwhile, the crowd created a bonfire and burnt any literature they could find. They were “screaming obscenities, smashing chairs,” and putting them in the fire. The mob used antisemitic and racist slurs; one person yelled, “God Bless Hitler and f--- you n----- bastards and Jew bastards.” They also threatened to “kill every Commie bastard.” Paul Robeson never made it to the concert grounds. State police did not arrive until 10:00 PM; when they did, they were “non-committal” but able to push the mob out and let the attendees leave. Fast claimed it was “organized fascism” that was “directed particularly against” the Black attendees. Throughout the entire event several people had found their way out and contacted the police, who failed to respond. No arrests were made of the attackers. There were several small injuries, but thirteen people had to seek medical attention, including one concertgoer who had been stabbed.⁴⁹

On August 29, Robeson demanded an inquiry into the violence and accountability for the lack of police protection. The press coverage that followed placed the blame largely on Robeson, whom the *New York Times* described as a “left-wing political storm center.” Local officials claimed that since there had been no arrests, there were no defendants to question. On August 30, Robeson released a statement noting that the “lynchers were out,” but instead of white sheets, they were hiding behind “American Legion caps, VFW buttons, and American flags.” He argued that the violent mob was fascist and the entire event was a “preview of American storm troopers,” who were backed by “the money-crowd in Wall St,” the “war-drum boys,” and the “clerical fascists.” He accused the “little legionnaires” of being capitalist tools who “know not what they do.” The blame lay with the federal government, led by Truman, who “talks a good game of civil rights” but ignored the lynchings that happened during his presidency. Robeson also blamed the state and local officials whose “law and order” was used to protect “so-called patriots” and oppress “my people.” The mob attack proved to him that “Truman was taking us down the road to fascism.” That night a protest against the violence was held in Harlem’s Golden Gate Ballroom, where Robeson condemned the attack and pledged to return.⁵⁰

Veterans’ groups accused the concert attendees of initiating violence, stating that when the ticket holders attempted to get in, they tried to force their way through the large crowd of veterans at the entrance, prompting violence. Clyde Lewis, commander of the VFW, said that it was a “spontaneous protest”—contrary to the days of newspaper

49 Fast, *Peekskill*, 22, 26; WCFIPV, “Eyewitness,” 8–9.

50 Paul Robeson, “I Will Sing in Peekskill,” August 30, 1949, box 73, n 305, Civil Rights Congress Papers, SCRBC; “Robeson Demands Violence Inquiry,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1949, 19; WCFIPV, “Eyewitness,” 10.

articles discussing the planning and the notices of veterans' meetings before the event—and that he rejected violence and lawlessness. But he added that the VFW would be happy to “buy Mr. Robeson a one-way ticket to Russia.” Governor Thomas Dewey ordered an investigation and removed local DA George Fanelli and Sheriff Fred W. Ruscoe to ensure it would not be biased.⁵¹

The state commander of the JWV, Arthur Aronson, claimed that if any members of the organization were found to be part of the mob, they would be court-martialed and removed. He acknowledged that the JWV did not participate as an organization but that some of its members were rumored to have been there. The antisemitism among the mob would have led to hostility toward its members, and some eyewitnesses observed that any Jew was attacked, whether they were with the mob or not. The JVC issued a statement on August 31 taking no responsibility: “The protest parade in which our organizations participated was held without any disorder and was peacefully disbanded. We decry any force or violence or any anti-religious or anti-racial demonstration that may have occurred and we welcome any investigation that may be made by all proper authorities.” Another Legion post requested an investigation into the Westchester County branch and its involvement. In probably an unsanctioned comment, the Peekskill Legion commander, Milton Flynt, claimed, “Our objective was to prevent the Paul Robeson concert, and I think our objective was reached.”⁵²

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) countered many of the claims circulating in the press, which blamed the concert attendees. In December 1949, the ACLU released a report on the riots. Much like the NAACP, the ACLU had an uncomfortable relationship with radicals. Its concerns dated back a full decade before the Peekskill events when witnesses at HUAC hearings described it as a communist front, and then-chair of the committee, Martin Dies, claimed it was “integral” to communism. The ACLU had several vehement anti-communists on its board, including socialist Norman Thomas and lawyer and FBI informant Morris Ernst. ACLU members tried to distance themselves from the red label by actively working with Dies and HUAC. In 1940, the ACLU executive board issued a statement dismissing communism as a “totalitarian ideology” akin to Nazism and denounced permitting any communists in the organization. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a CPUSA member, was on the ACLU board and was expelled that same year after refusing to resign. This inner turmoil meant that the ACLU was not a central advocate for civil liberties during the worst of the red-baiting, but it still did a thorough investigation of Peekskill given how public the events became.⁵³

51 “Robeson Demands”; “Dewey Aide Urged for Robeson Row,” *New York Times*, August 31, 1949, 16.

52 “Robeson Demands”; “Dewey Aide”; WCFIPV, “Eyewitness,” 10; ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 22.

53 Mary Ann Trasciatti, *Elizabeth Gurley Flynn: The Rebel Girl, Democracy, and Revolution* (Rutgers University Press, 2025), 155–56, 158.

The ACLU concluded that the communists and socialists had never tried to include the local Peekskill residents in their events; thus, People's Artists Inc. was expecting only its own supporters. The concert was not in Peekskill but five miles away, on private property only accessible via a private road, out of earshot of the public, so press suggestions that communists were invading were "pretended outrage." In the end, the invasion was of "Peekskill men" into nearby Cortlandt "for the purpose of committing a crime." It was "an unprovoked trespass upon private property with intent to commit malicious mischief[,] and a willful violation" of constitutional rights. The ACLU report included eyewitness accounts of men wearing "Legion caps" intimidating the attendees and initiating the violence, and it noted that until 10:00 PM no more than six police were present.⁵⁴

In the days after, the local newspaper and the veterans' groups "assumed a more defensive attitude" and changed their stories. The situation remained tense in Peekskill—some locals who supported the right of the concert to proceed received death threats. The Westchester Committee for a Fair Inquiry into the Peekskill Violence was formed, and it voted to invite Robeson back on September 4. It claimed that an ever present seething antisemitism had burst into the open after the first riot. Some of the summer Jewish residents reported that cars full of men drove up to their homes and yelled antisemitic comments, and that an intruder was caught trying to sneak into one of the colonies. There were also boycotts of local businesses that had condemned the riot, and the Verplanck post tried to get the town to deny the "right of assemblage" of communist groups in Cortlandt. Peekskill was on tenterhooks in the days leading up to the next planned concert.⁵⁵

Veterans applied for and received a permit to hold a protest parade in Cortlandt the day of the planned make-up concert. The concert promoters tried to get an injunction against the parade, but the judge refused on the basis that there was no evidence the veterans would cause problems. The *Peekskill Evening Star*, suddenly concerned about the furor it had helped initiate, ran a plea in its September 2 edition that noted fourteen veterans' groups planned to take part in the protests, and it hoped the mayor would not allow it to take place in front of the concert venue. Instead, it suggested that the protest parade should be in Peekskill proper. The veterans were not interested in that suggestion.⁵⁶ Plans were made to provide more protection than at the first concert. Governor Dewey empowered local police to use state troopers, and Robeson vowed that the concertgoers would have their own protection. Nine hundred to twelve hundred

54 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 7, 11, 18, 25.

55 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 17, 22, 27, 30; WCFIPV, "Eyewitness," 10.

56 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 31, 33.

police officers were dispatched to Cortlandt. Twenty-five hundred to three thousand union members volunteered to provide protection.⁵⁷

On September 4, anywhere from one thousand to three thousand protestors, or “aroused veterans,” appeared and blocked the entrance, preventing Robeson from entering the venue. The concert planners asked for an escort from the police, which they refused. By 2:00 PM, Robeson had made it inside the concert grounds along with a crowd of about twenty-five thousand to watch him perform. The performance went on without any issue; problems started when the concert attendees tried to leave. As cars were being directed out of the park grounds, they were attacked by stone-throwing protestors. People in the cars were urged to put their windows up, which managed to protect some of them, but stones and even bricks made it through, causing injuries. One newspaper reported that the attendees faced “a barrage of stones, pop bottles, sticks, and tree branches.”⁵⁸

The union members, it was later confirmed, had not instigated any conflict with the veterans and stayed true to their intention to provide protection. The ACLU absolved Dewey of the later accusations that he did not do enough to prevent violence at the second concert but confirmed that the police did not do enough to prevent the second riot. The state police were orderly, but the county police “fraternized” with the rioters, “beat Robeson guards,” and did not dissuade the violence. A Black World War I veteran and concert attendee was beaten by police after he “talked back” when a rioter spit in his face, an event recorded on camera. The ACLU believed that this time the violence was planned. Three witnesses saw veterans “loading rocks” into their cars near the concert grounds. Multiple witnesses observed people putting rocks in their cars and recruiting teenagers, and one witness claimed that a veteran told them they wanted to make it “physically impossible for anyone to get to the concert grounds.”⁵⁹

Witnesses reported the police stopped buses of people leaving, made them exit the vehicles, and beat them. The unionists, many of whom were veterans themselves, were the last to leave the concert grounds; at least twenty-five were arrested. Others were ordered out of their cars multiple times by the police and forced to run through a gauntlet of club-wielding officers, who beat them. The police also used racist epithets and reportedly refused protection when the attendees tried to leave, or they ignored the mob’s attacks. The national media was present and reported on the violence, making it much harder for locals to deny what happened. One CBS radio report observed veterans,

57 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 31; WCFIPV, “Eyewitness,” 11; Stephen Fischer, “ACLU Probers Find Police Guilty in Peekskill Riots,” *Daily Compass* (New York City), December 1949, 4; “Robeson Followers Stoned: Pop Bottles Fly as Cops Stand Guard,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 5, 1949, 1.

58 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 32–33; WCFIPV, “Eyewitness,” 11; “Robeson Followers Stoned.”

59 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 31, 39, 41; WCFIPV, “Eyewitness,” 11; Fischer, “ACLU Probers”; “Robeson Followers Stoned”; Dorinson, “Paul Robeson and Jackie Robinson,” 21.

organized by their service branch, breaking the lines and attacking the concertgoers, and police beating a Black attendee.⁶⁰

District Attorney Fanelli issued his own report, which defied many of the eyewitness accounts and photographic evidence. He claimed that teenagers were the only ones that engaged in any violence against the concert attendees, that the police acted commendably, and that it was the concertgoers who initiated the violence. The press reported that at least eight cars were damaged and 145 people were injured; Fanelli's report noted only three damaged cars and seventy people with "minor" injuries. Only four rioters were arrested, all teenagers, for overturning a vehicle.⁶¹

Robeson remained defiant after the second riot, condemning the police and veterans. He believed the violence demonstrated the need for the progressive movement, and he "told the Legion" he would continue his work across the US and the world. The "Legion bands . . . revile me, they scandalize me, and try to holler me down on all sides." But he said it was okay, because his voice could be heard above the "screams of the intolerant."⁶²

The national reaction condemned the violence, and George Craig, American Legion national commander, issued a tepid statement denouncing the violence and claiming that it wished to leave "pro-Communist demonstrations strictly alone." The JWV's leadership strongly condemned the riots as "shameful" and forbade its members from participating in any further demonstrations after the local American Veterans Council announced a "patriotic" demonstration in Peekskill the following week. The locals had had enough, and a group of clergy protested the planned demonstration, forcing the group to relent and cancel it.⁶³

The ACLU report countered most of the claims made by the press and the locals. There was no "communist provocation," the police willfully withheld assistance at the first riot, and the local press was responsible for inflaming the passions of the veterans. It also laid the blame on the veterans' groups, stating that "the evidence proves beyond question that the veterans intended to prevent the concerts from being held." The locations of the "veterans' parades" were "deliberately provocative," and one of the wounded veterans was hurt while "assisting in the commission of a crime." The riots were not spontaneous, and they set the stage for local governments to further restrict freedom of speech. Local police not only did not prevent violence but encouraged and

60 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 50–51.

61 "Police Commended in Peekskill Fray," *New York Times*, September 8, 1949, 1, 34.

62 Paul Robeson, "My Answer," *New York Age*, September 17, 1949, MG 170, Paul Robeson Papers, SCRBC.

63 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 48; "Police Commended."

sometimes participated in it, and it was only national condemnation that led some Peekskill locals to decry their neighbors' actions.⁶⁴

That same month, CRC lawyers filed the lawsuit "under the seldom used Civil Rights Acts," asking for a total of \$2 million in damages and that the defendants be "forever enjoined" from "conspiring and interfering with plaintiffs and others who hereafter may peaceably assemble in Westchester County." The suit claimed it was "inconceivable that the national government is powerless to protect public discussion of ideas," a claim at the heart of Cold War radicalism, that the federal government enabled state abuse by refusing to defend constitutional liberties. The CRC also filed for a mistrial of the CPUSA leaders, claiming that the Peekskill riots and the violence done to two of the defendants in attendance, Benjamin Davis and Irving Potash, proved that the men could not receive a fair trial in the Southern District of New York.⁶⁵

Governor Dewey ordered a grand jury investigation into the riots, and the lawsuit was stayed until its report was issued. The grand jury findings, released in June 1950, were provocative, describing the summer colonies as indoctrination centers and "aggressively pro-communist," teaching the overthrow of the US government. This, the grand jury concluded, had to be considered in any investigation of the events. It concluded that Robeson, "a symbol of communism itself," and his comments in 1949, presumably at the Paris Peace Conference, combined with the "awareness" of Americans that the CPUSA was planning to overthrow the US government, "were the underlying causes of the . . . disorders." The "veterans of Peekskill" organized against that threat, the cross-burning was an "unfortunate prank," and the September 4 event was organized by the CPUSA to take advantage of the publicity. The grand jury thus blamed the CPUSA for whipping up "racial and religious hatred." It also described the union volunteers as "Communist forces" who acted as a "quasi-military force" with strict discipline, but it did concede that they did not incite violence. The crowd outside was inflamed by a speaker at the event calling the veterans "un-American filth," but the grand jury dismissed the veterans' actions and instead laid the blame on teenagers and "hoodlums." It dismissed the ACLU report as "flimsy" and "scandalous," and rejected its conclusion that the violence was inflamed by racism, pointing to the participation of some Jewish war veterans in the protests. It praised the police actions and advised that veterans' groups should in the future avoid attendance near "subversive" events, presumably for their own protection. The report itself was aggressively anti-communist and endorsed constitutional violations against alleged subversives. The lawsuit was allowed to move

64 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 50–51.

65 Stephen Fischer, "27 Sue over Peekskill Riot," *Daily Compass*, December 16, 1949, MG 170, Paul Robeson Papers, SCRBC; *Robeson*, 94 F. Supp. 62; Motion for a Mistrial, *USA v. William Foster, et al.*, Box 112, x. 56, Civil Rights Congress Papers, SCRBC.

forward in federal courts but was dismissed in 1952 by the Supreme Court, which ruled the federal government did not have jurisdiction.⁶⁶

By then Robeson had other problems—in 1950, his passport had been seized. He was popular in Europe, and this restriction on his movement damaged his career and income; it would not be returned until 1958. Compounding that was further censorship in the US. Wherever he traveled, veterans' groups attempted to get his concerts shut down, picketed the ones that were allowed to continue, and condemned him as a communist agitator. In November 1952, in Hartford, Connecticut, where the Robesons had made their home, veterans' groups organized against his appearance at a fundraising event at a local high school. It was not unusual, but it hit close to home, quite literally, as it was in the town where they lived. The Board of Education stood up for his right to sing at the school, but there were and would be more cancellations. Though his income plummeted, and veterans' groups and law enforcement haunted his every move, Robeson continued his political agitation.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Scholars have summarized the Peekskill riots as signs of the times, an expression of anti-communism only unusual in their violence. Robeson biographer Martin Duberman has explored the riots and Robeson's reaction to them as part of his "powerful will," which he combined with "ingrained optimism." In the face of resistance, Robeson powered on and even closed "his mind to counterarguments." Howard Bryant has written that the Peekskill Riots were orchestrated by law enforcement and veterans, but were not surprising. The attendees were blamed because they venerated Robeson, allegedly a treasonous tyrant and an avowed communist. Joseph Walwick has shown that the veterans believed that their actions at Peekskill were part of a larger struggle to "defend American values" in the "ongoing struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union." It was not an attack on their fellow Americans; it was an attack against the Soviets. Gerald Horne has shown that the Peekskill riots were part of a "disturbing trend" that singled out Robeson, and that his wife believed the mob was there to kill him.⁶⁸

66 "Robeson Enjoined in Peekskill Suit," *New York Times*, March 1, 1950, 3; "Excerpts from Grand Jury Report," *New York Times*, June 17, 1950, 2; "Robeson, 29 Others, Lose Damage Suit," *New York Times*, January 24, 1952, 10.

67 Horne, *Paul Robeson*, 127, 130, 133; "Recital by Robeson Opposed in Hartford," *New York Times*, November 11, 1952, 17.

68 Howard Bryant, *Kings and Pawns: Jackie Robinson and Paul Robeson in America* (Harper Collins, 2026), 158–62; Joseph Walwick, "Paul Robeson, Peekskill, and the Red Menace," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 66, no. 1 (1999): 71–72; Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (Ballantine Books, 1989), 363; Horne, *Paul Robeson*, 134.

The Peekskill riots have been seen as emblematic of the tense Cold War years and evidence of Robeson's steely character in the face of regular and sometimes violent harassment. This study instead centers the veterans' groups and shows that rather than just a sign of the times, the Peekskill riots demonstrate an ongoing populist fascism endemic to the US body politic. Veterans' groups are no longer engaged in organized vigilantism. But scholars have found a strong link between veterans and vigilante violence. Kathleen Belew demonstrates that one of the worst cases of domestic terrorism, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, was orchestrated by veterans Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. McVeigh and Nichols met in the US Army and were members of militias and white supremacist groups. They were likely part of a larger conspiracy, but the FBI did not follow up on credible eyewitness testimony to avoid drawing out the investigation and to convince the American public that the perpetrators had been found. Joseph Darda has shown that veterans returning from the Vietnam War were angered and felt disenfranchised by the women's and civil rights movements, and that some joined and organized with white supremacist organizations. In 2024, Amy Cooter released a study showing that veterans make up 30 percent of militia membership, and 40 percent of militia leadership. Between 13 and 17 percent of the insurrectionists charged for their actions on January 6, 2021, were veterans, which is "more than double the military representation in the US population." White supremacist organizations actively recruit within the military's ranks. In 2020, the *Military Times* found that "more than half of minority service members say they have personally witnessed examples of white nationalism or ideological-driven racism within the ranks." The House Committee on Veterans Affairs held hearings in the wake of the January 6 attacks to try and understand this link between veterans, white supremacy, and vigilantism. In 2023, the Council on Foreign Relations concluded that efforts had to be made to counter white supremacist vigilantism among veterans and service members, as a matter of national security.⁶⁹

The Peekskill riots are important in demonstrating the hysteria that gripped the nation, but more than that, they show the concerted and organized efforts of veterans' groups against their fellow Americans. Though McCarthy lends his name to the period, and Hoover and the FBI perpetuated anti-leftist organization throughout his long tenure, veterans' organizations, particularly the American Legion, were instruments of

69 Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Harvard University Press, 2018), esp. 227–30; Joseph Darda, *How White Men Won the Culture Wars: A History of Veteran America* (University of California Press, 2021); Amy Cooter, "Veterans and Extremism: From Militias to January 6th and Real Patriotism," Middlebury Institute of International Studies, Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism, January 22, 2024, <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec/ctec-publications/veterans-and-extremism-militias-january-6th>; Leo Shane III, "Signs of White Supremacy, Extremism Up Again in Poll of Active-Duty Troops," *Military Times*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/02/06/signs-of-white-supremacy-extremism-up-again-in-poll-of-active-duty-troops/>; "The Violent Far-Right Terrorist Threat to the US Military," *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 31, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/violent-far-right-terrorist-threat-us-military>.

anti-communist repression. These groups engaged in a populist fascism that sometimes devolved into violence and mirrored the fascism some of the individuals involved had ostensibly fought to defeat in Europe. Anti-communism provided cover for their undemocratic actions. Anti-communism and fascism are kin; they are not mutually exclusive. And veterans' groups, specifically the American Legion, have claimed the right to define patriotism and Americanism, though what they have sometimes sought is unquestioned loyalty, white supremacy, and unfettered capitalism. Their methods of censorship and vigilante violence resemble what they claim communism sought to do.

The Peekskill riots were not anomalous, nor unique to the Cold War era; rather, they suggest a throughline in vigilante violence targeting anti-capitalists and anti-racists. This populist fascism, under an anti-communist guise, operated with the sanction, and sometimes participation, of law enforcement and went unpunished because of a general acceptance by the American public, which suggests that fascism has a long history in the US. It is an oft-repeated and tired trope to link racial justice activism to a foreign conspiracy, but it resonated with veterans who saw themselves at constant war even when their official service had ended. The war they waged at home was to secure the racial status quo by muting their fellow citizens, defining Americanism as slavish devotion, and expecting the same from others. They engaged in the violent censorship that fascist states propagated, and they did so without reflection or concern for the rights of their fellow citizens.