

Hello, my name is Ian Strasma. I'm currently a senior at the University of Kansas and I'm studying Interdisciplinary Computing with a focus on Journalism, with a minor in Japanese and Linguistics. I'm also a huge fan of talking about history. Honestly, I could go on for hours about history, but for this purpose of this podcast I'm really lasering in on the beginning of the Second Red Scare that happened in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America.

More specifically, I wanted to look at the perjury trial of Alger Hiss. Hiss's trial happened at a weirdly crucial point in time when considering the political landscape of America, and the way it was reported on allowed it to become a part of the growing fear of communism present in the American populace. I mean, Joseph McCarthy began his infamous crusade against supposed communists in the State Department only two weeks after a verdict was reached in the Hiss trial, and that was no coincidence. But the whole story of the trial itself is pretty fascinating in and of itself, it involves some well-known names and a lot of legal drama. So, without any further rambling, let's take a look at the context that led us to this moment in time.

To set the scene, this whole affair takes place right after the end of WWII. Hopefully most listeners are aware of the broad strokes of what occurred during and after WWII, but as a quick reminder Europe had basically been ravaged by its second horrific war within 30 years and America, relatively untouched by the carnage across the ocean, emerged victorious alongside its begrudging ally the Soviet Union. Over the course of the next few years, the US would immediately sour to Soviet Union, basically ushering in the Cold War, where the two superpowers used their vast influence to meddle with each other and various other countries in order to spread their preferred economic ideology: respectively capitalism and communism.

I think this is a really interesting time not only in American History, but world history as well. As hard as it is to believe now, the Cold War was not an inevitability after WWII. Obviously, it is not super surprising that this happened, I mean there's a reason it is the "Second" Red Scare. But the shift in tone towards the USSR after the Fall of Berlin happened pretty quickly relative to the way politics can work, and a lot of this was done by convincing the public that communism posed a really large threat to the established order. When taking a look at how the Second Red Scare was started, there are really three main events that rattled the American psyche. The first one was Soviets getting their hands on atomic weapons. Klaus Fuchs, who worked at Los Alamos, was able to provide the Soviets with the information necessary to produce an atomic bomb, which was successfully detonated in August 1949 – completely blindsiding the US. The second one is the Chinese communists' victory over the nationalists in December 1949, which was very often portrayed as "China falling to the Reds," a huge loss in the eyes of Americans. And finally, we get to the third one, and topic of this podcast: Alger Hiss's perjury trial.

Alger Hiss is a name you probably haven't heard, unless you're a pretty big nerd like I am. He's basically only known for this trial. But in 1950, a majority of Americans were aware of who he was and the events surrounding his supposed perjury. It was national news. So, who is this guy? And what did he do? Or at least, what was he accused of doing?

Before the events of this story, Hiss was basically your run-of-the-mill left-of-center early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century statesman. He was born in 1904 in Maryland, grew up protestant, went to Harvard Law, was the protégé of future Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, clerked for at-the-time Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, became a government attorney, and then hopped around a bunch of different departments within FDR's administration until he ended up at the state department. He was

named Director of the Office of Special Political Affairs in 1944, and he was part of the US delegation to Yalta Conference in 1945 where FDR, Churchill, and Stalin met right before the end of the war. Hiss himself in his book *Recollections of a Life* claimed that what he had witnessed at Yalta gave him hope for an amicable relationship between the US and the USSR. He then went on to do a bit of work for the newly created United Nations before his career was derailed by the events of this trial. You see, despite being an ardent New-Dealer in 1940s America, Hiss had dabbled a bit in Communism in the 1930s. And in 1948 Whittaker Chambers, a former soviet spy who renounced his communist views, accused Hiss of being a spy for the Soviet Union during the 1930s before his career at the state department.

Now this is where things get a little murky, and of course it is probably the most important part of the story, but before we talk about exactly what Hiss and others have had to say about his potential involvement in American communist activities, we should first talk about what that even means in the first place. Now, in the 1930s, communism, though still reviled by a large portion of the American Right, was an ideology that had some supporters in the states for myriad reason. For one, America was in the middle of the Great Depression, a disaster unequivocally caused by unchecked Capitalism that had led to hardship and suffering for a large number of Americans. And at the time, the Soviet Union still stood as a beacon of a successful implementation of Communism, the reign of Stalin only entering its second decade and most of the atrocities not known by many Americans. And interestingly enough, the population most open to the idea of communism were left-wing intellectuals – fittingly Alger Hiss is exactly that. Susan Jacoby, in her book *Alger Hiss and the Battle for History*, “intellectuals were more active participants than most other Americans in left-wing causes, especially those involving foreign affairs.” And this also makes sense, fascism was on the rise in Western Europe, the Spanish Civil War had gone in Franco’s favor, and Mussolini and Hitler were firmly entrenching their power at the time, and the only true opposition to fascism in the 30s was the Soviet Union.

So, knowing all of this, it would be unsurprising if Hiss had involved himself in left-wing advocacy during the 30s, especially given the political climate. And it wouldn’t be all too surprising if he found himself in the company of communists, or even considered himself one at one point during the decade, but from all accounts by the time that the end of the 40s rolled around, Hiss was not involved in any such activities anymore. And in walks Whittaker Chambers, who I would love to dig into but for the sake of time I will just point out that if you are at all suspicious of Hiss’s veracity you should be equally if not more dubious of Chambers. Called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, Chambers testified under oath that Alger Hiss was among those he had known to be a communist. Three days later, Hiss himself appeared before the same committee to vehemently deny the allegations.

This is where things spiral into the legal drama, and for the purpose of this podcast I’m going to summarize what happened super quickly so we can get into the nitty gritty of what this all means. Basically, Hiss’s preeminence and willingness to appear before the House Committee put them in a position to totally scrutinize him and his connection to Chambers. This effort, spearheaded by then-congressman Richard Nixon, followed a weird trajectory. Hiss initially claimed he didn’t know Chambers, when presented with pictures he claimed he might have known him, and then when seeing him in person he said that he had known Chambers and had actually subletted his apartment to him, but he knew him under the pseudonym George Crosley. Chambers claimed he never used a pseudonym, and then went on to claim that not only was Hiss a communist, but he was a spy for the Soviet Union. More testifying in front of committee happened, and then boom Chambers leads authorities to his Maryland farm and inside a hollowed-out pumpkin he reveals that he has classified state department documents.

No I'm not joking, this really happened, they were called the Pumpkin Papers, and they spelled doom for Hiss. I'd also like to note that press was eating all of this up, and why wouldn't they especially when the fear of communism within the government was starting to grow.

Now since the statute of limitations for the crime of espionage that would taken place in the 30s would have passed at this point, Hiss ended up being charged with perjury. After a mistrial in his first trial, Hiss was found guilty of perjury. The prosecution's case hinged on the pumpkin papers and their potential relation to Hiss and his typewriter, while the defense tried their best to use character witnesses, such as Adlai Stevenson and Felix Frankfurter, to try to redeem the by-now tarnished reputation of Hiss. But it was of no use. And with this conviction in place, with the American public ultra-aware of this newfound "threat" of communists in the state department, the junior senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, gave his infamous speech two weeks after the Hiss verdict declaring that he had a list of 205 names of state department employees who were communists. The media latched onto this immediately, and with that the second Red Scare had truly begun.

The press was pretty involved throughout this entire saga, but I think it's worth zooming in on how the press reported on the verdict. I've been purposefully vague about whether or not Alger Hiss was actually a spy for the USSR, mostly because its still honestly up in the air (though personally I think he wasn't and if he was it was in a very limited capacity due to the lack of evidence found). Either way, Alger Hiss was only convicted of perjuring himself in front of the committee. But a lot of newspapers reporting on the verdict very explicitly tie his perjury to this supposed espionage. The Punxsutawney Spirit calls him a "liar and a spy" and the Tablet in New York said Hiss was "indirectly found guilty of treachery against the United States." And all of this was used to fan the flames of fear.

And of course, this fear was utilized to restrict the freedom of Americans. Inspired by their success with Red Scare tactics, intelligence agencies spied on leftist organizations, communists were not allowed to work for the defense industry solely based on their personal political ideology, and a bunch of figures in Hollywood were blacklisted. All of this was made possible by the round-the-clock media coverage of the potential communist threat sparked within the American consciousness by the Hiss trial and made mainstream by McCarthy

But beyond the curbing of civil liberties, the Hiss trial somehow still looms large over the state of American politics, mostly because it laid the groundwork for conservative thought and political actions up until the modern day. This is pretty evident when you look at where the figures involved in the affair ended up. Nixon, essentially an unknown representative before the committee hearings, leveraged the Hiss affair to run for the Senate in 1950. Nixon's popularity among conservatives for his hardline stance against communism made room for him on as the vice-presidential candidate on the Eisenhower ticket in 1952. Eisenhower was able to win the presidency that year as well against Adlai Stevenson, the Illinois Governor who testified in the Hiss trial as a character witness for the defense. This record was brought up by the Eisenhower campaign against him as proof that he was weak on communism, and no doubt was one of the reasons that the Republicans were able to clinch the presidency and remain in power for the rest of the decade. Nixon then went on to become president of course. And interestingly enough Reagan attributes his political shift from liberal to conservative in the early 50s in part to the Hiss affair, even claiming that he viewed Chambers as a hero.

And in spirit, the damage has kind of already been done. It's extremely easy to compare the Red Scare's effect on the lives of Americans to the 9/11 response a couple decades ago with Patriot Act.

We've given up even more of our privacy due to the fear of foreign influence, that ostensibly only exists in the mind of the media and conservative thinkers and pundits. The most interesting newspaper I ran into while looking into the Hiss was a Montana paper called the People's voice. It was a left-leaning, woman-owned paper, and it had a fascinating article about the Hiss affair that compared it to the Dreyfus affair, a French scandal from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although the Dreyfus affair was caused by extreme antisemitism, it involved a similar level of fear-mongering and national frenzy that the Hiss trials caused. I implore you to read up on it. But I'll leave you with what this Helena-based paper had to say about thing while it was happening: "The final outcome of the Hiss affair, only time and a new grip on sanity by the American people will determine ... [but] Hiss has been made a sacrificial offering on the altar of American reaction; a major scapegoat in attempting to keep hysteria on high in our once happy land."

Thank you so much for listening.