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“Potential Sabotage Agent”: A journalist, the Communist Party and the FBI

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FBI surveillance has been a significant topic of historical research in the last seven decades especially in relation to communism and members of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). This study examined the FBI records of Robert Fowler Hall (RFH), a journalist and newspaper owner who served as both a district organizer and later as a reporter and editor for *The Daily Worker* in the 1940s and 1950s. Our findings showed that the FBI surveilled RFH and his activities, including his stories and columns for the *Worker*, from the 1930s into the 1960s. The Bureau surveilled his personal relationships, his meetings with Party members, his travels (both stateside and internationally) and his visits to the U.S. embassies of communist countries. FBI agents framed RFH as a communist activist who posed a security threat and not as a dangerous radical. The FBI gleaned most of the information about RFH via informants and surveillance, but with few personal interactions. More than 70% of the FBI documents on RFH were summaries of previous reports shared among the Bureaus.

Keywords: Journalist, communist, FBI, CPUSA, framing

In October 1968, the FBI field office in Albany, New York, sent a memorandum to the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in Washington D.C. advising its office that RFH, the editor and publisher of an upstate New York newspaper, had spent two weeks in Greece in late August on a family vacation (FBI, 1968). Hall, who served as Sunday editor of *The Daily Worker* in the 1950s, had worked in some form of journalism since the 1920s and would do so until the end of his life in the early 1990s. He had been a member of the CPUSA from the mid-

1930s until leaving the Party in late 1956 after Nikita Khrushchev’s revelation that Stalin had ordered millions of his own people killed or banished.

The FBI, however, sporadically surveilled Hall with the help of the local police chief and the local post office about a dozen years after he left the Party, partially explaining both the complexity associated with the Cold War (FBI, 1968). The Albany FBI wrote that Hall was not engaged in “any subversive activity,” but instead “holds an honored and respected position in the community and no interview with him is contemplated at this time” (FBI, 1968). The 1968 documents are some of the last recorded field reports on Hall’s activities.

This paper is a content analysis of Hall’s FBI files. Using framing as a theoretical framework, this quantitative analysis explores how and why Hall was under FBI surveillance for several decades. The FBI files were obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request. The files are comprised of eight sections running to more than 1,800 pages of reports generated from offices in Birmingham, Alabama; New Orleans, Louisiana; Atlanta, Georgia; Albany, New York; and Washington D.C.

The purpose of this study is to determine how and why the FBI dedicated significant resources to surveilling Hall from the 1930s through the 1960s and what did they find and then how they used that information. This study is important because Hall was not a key member of the Party hierarchy and yet the FBI diligently tracked his conversations, his movements, and his associations before he left the Party in the mid-1950s. Indeed, looking at his journalism career, it seems Hall was more of a successful journalist, writer, editor, and publisher in the aggregate (a period that spanned eight decades) rather than a prominent communist. To date, there is a lack of research about Hall. This study has merit because it analyzes a significant FBI trove of documents on a largely ignored person during the communist era using a methodology not often used in historical studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Who Was Hall and Why He Mattered

Hall was born in Pascagoula, Mississippi, but his family soon moved to Mobile, Alabama, where his father worked as an accountant. His parents, he wrote in an unpublished manuscript, instilled in him a love of reading. As a teenager, he worked at The Mobile Press-Register and News-Item in the 1920s, which hired Hall after he graduated from high school. After about a year at the newspaper, Hall decided to enroll at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, but he returned to Mobile after one year. Shortly after returning, he decided to take a reporting job at the Pensacola (Florida) Journal to double his pay. From there, Hall soon found another better paying job at the Gulf, Mobile, and Ohio Railroad, where he worked for four years in the advertising and public relations department. His time at the railroad allowed him the opportunity to travel the South by rail, where he witnessed the racial inequality and agricultural difficulties of sharecroppers first-hand (RFH Papers, 1929, Box 11, Folder 13).

After four years at the railroad, he decided to return to school, enrolling at Columbia University in New York to study agriculture and economics. While at Columbia, Hall rode a bus with other students to Harlan, Kentucky, to join striking United Mine Workers of America members protesting wages and benefits. His experiences in Harlan, along with witnessing the Farmers’ Holiday Strike in western Iowa in 1932, further influenced his empathy toward working class solutions to the Great Depression.

Hall left Columbia, albeit one course short of his degree but holding a Phi Beta Kappa key. Almost fifty years later, he would write Dean Arno Collery at Columbia asking that a constitutional law class he completed at an upstate New York Community College be counted in lieu of returning to complete the failed statistics class. The dean waived the statistics requirement (RFH Papers, Box 11, Folder 13, 1981).

When he left Columbia, Hall ventured to Montana to edit a pro-union magazine and work to organize farmers in western Iowa. In 1932, he returned to Alabama to become district director for the CPUSA. Later, he would run for Congress to represent the Ninth District on the Communist Party ticket. He had become disillusioned with the lack of racial progress and the agricultural stagnancy that kept the South in an antebellum capsule (RFH Papers, N.D., Box 1). Shortly after an almost two-year voluntary stint in the U.S. Army near the end of World War II.

The Appeal of Communism

The poverty and racial inequality that Hall witnessed working for the railroad drove him to explore different economic systems. Fast (1990, p.87) wrote in his memoir *Being Red* that intellectuals joined the Party “out of a sense of social justice.” Hall was first introduced to a different economic model by his friends, whose family owned a furniture store in Mobile. In early 1930s, he joined the Party (there is no document that verifies the exact year he joined the Party) and he would eventually work as a reporter, columnist and editor of their newspaper, *The Daily Worker*.

Kazin (1995), writing in the *American Historical Review*, noted that the communists in the United States put significant energy into striking down Jim Crow laws and into recruiting Black members. The fight against segregation and *The Daily Worker*’s coverage of those issues were a hallmark of the organization in the 1940s and 1950s. A fundamental urge to help others, whether achieving civil rights and legal justice for Blacks or securing better wages for industrial workers, was a contributing factor for those who joined the Party, according to Klar and Kasser (2009). Herbert Aptheker, who edited the Party’s theoretical journal *Political Affairs*, joined for the same reasons as Hall. Aptheker promoted social change because the Party “provided the model for black-white unity to fight discrimination” (Murrell, 2006, p. 103).

Not only did the Party appeal to middle-class intellectuals and trade unionists, the Party also appealed to student activists. In the book, *When the old left was young*, Cohen (1993) wrote that communism appealed to members of the National Student League at Columbia because of the Depression and the perceived shortcomings of capitalism. Hall, who was a member of the NSL, was convinced that unless radical economic and racial changes occurred, the “South would remain a backward and impoverished region” (p. 46). Hall also believed that the National Student League should focus on civil liberties violations to attract more members to communism (Storrs, 2013).

In Gornick’s (1977, p.13) memory of her parents’ involvement in the Communist Party, she recalled: “It was their passion that converted them, passion that held them, passion that lifted them up and then twisted them down.” Despite the passion, the Party never amounted to a significant voting bloc or effective social change agent. The Party amassed about 75,000 members by 1947 before the Cold War soured prospective members on the merits of the Russian system. Zygmunt (1972) wrote that movements can grow unless membership in that organization has “widespread negative repercussions for a recruit’s relations with non-members,” such as the Cold War. At some points in its brief heydays of the 1930s and 1940s, about 40% to 50% of the Party membership resided in New York (Gregory, 2006).

Another study (Morgan, 2003) cites the same numbers as the American Social Movements project but does not provide a source for those numbers. Whether the membership numbers were counted accurately was a moot point for Caute (1978, p.185), who wrote that, “In reality, the CPUSA was a flea on a dog’s back, no more.” Despite any disparity in the membership count, using numbers to measure or achieve goals is a “very misleading index of the power of a political group” (Barrington, 1945). That the CPUSA, however, derived a measure of power because it was a Communist Party in the United States, the most powerful of nations and “therefore it had an importance far beyond its size or effectiveness” (Fast, 1957, p.60).

The Party’s influence on U.S. policies is difficult to measure, but one of its primary targets of influence was the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), a union formed in 1935 within the American Federation of Labor (AFL). According to Barrett (1999), the CPUSA was at its most influential at the end of World War II with a membership of about 80,000. The Party also “cast one-third of the votes on the executive committee of the CIO.” The CIO would later merge with the AFL in 1955. The Party’s influence in the industrial sector proved to be short-lived. Shortly after the war, the Party reported that “only 29 percent of its members were industrial workers” (Caute, 1978, p.185).

In the 1950s, the Party mostly collapsed for several reasons, including Nikita Khrushchev’s speech to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party, the earlier passage of the Smith Act, the Internal Security Act of 1950 and the Communist Control Act of 1954. “Few were more shaken by the Khrushchev revelations than The Daily Worker staff,” John Gates wrote in his autobiography, referring to how Stalin’s purge of millions of his own people in the 1930s was an attempt to create a cult of reverence for Stalin (Gates, 1958, p.161). After Khrushchev’s speech leaked to the media, readers of the Worker offered their perspectives. Gates and the newspaper staff decided to print all of the responses to the speech under the banner of “Speak Your Piece” (p.161). Hall was a member of that staff which, by Gate’s estimation, was running an annual deficit of \$200,000 annually for the last eight years of its publication (Gates, 1958). Running all of the “letters to the editor” in the Worker, however, could not attract new subscribers to save the debt-ridden newspaper.

The same year as Khrushchev’s speech, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Communist Party members could invoke the Fifth Amendment and not be compelled to identify as CPUSA members. The court ruled that the Smith Act had been interpreted too broadly. “A decade of legal attacks against the Communist Party was coming to an end. The law was no longer an effective weapon” to be used to intimidate and prosecute Communist Party members (Weiner, 2012, p.195). But for Hall, at least, the ruling did not effectively make an impression on whether to stay in the Party or to leave the Party.

Later that year, Hall decided it was time for him to leave the Party. In a handwritten note to his mother, Elaine F. Hall, the son wrote that he had “decided to leave the paper. Part of the reason is that we must have more money to live on. But that is not the whole story. I would be willing to make the financial sacrifices if I thought that by doing so I was advancing human welfare” (RFH Papers, 1956, Box 11, Folder 13). The letter, written while the Halls were vacationing in East Jamaica, Vermont, is evidence that he had been contemplating this move. Further in the letter, he wrote, “I have some regrets for the past but not too many. Whatever I did, I followed the dictates of my conscience, and I have never injured anyone, nor have I injured my country” (RFH Papers, 1956, Box 11, Folder 13).

Now, Hall had to find work. In the letter to his mother, he admitted that money was a significant determining factor in leaving the Party. He soon found a job in upstate New York and soon thereafter

registered as a member of the Republican Party. Hall continued his career as a journalist, writer, and editor until he retired. He died in 1993.

The FBI Surveillance of Communists

Almost from its beginnings as a Party in the early 1920s, membership in the Communist Party in the United States attracted the attention of the FBI. The FBI and the U.S. government began surveilling people with communist sympathies or communist ties after the revolution in Russia and with the formation of the CPUSA. Once the Depression created critics of the U.S. economy in the 1930s, the government turned its attention to political critics of capitalism, namely, the Communist Party in the mid-1930s. Eventually, the FBI would attempt to infiltrate political adversaries of the U.S. system using paid and unpaid informants. The informants would gather information on individuals and organizations based on their activities and communication networks. By May 1940, the FBI could legally wiretap Communist Party members and organizations with permission of the U.S. Attorney General in addition to agents being able to physically surveil subjects. Later, the FBI would develop COINTELPRO, a counterintelligence program, to “target a wide range of groups and individuals viewed as threatening to the status quo” (Cunningham & Browning, 2004, p. 350). In the 1990s and into the 2000s, the FBI began to release, albeit heavily redacted, records pertaining to the infiltration of the Communist Party USA (Klehr & Haynes, 2022).

Born in Mississippi, but raised in Mobile, Alabama, Hall ran for Congress on the Communist Party ticket in Alabama, where he served as a district organizer in the early 1930s and 1940s and later worked as a Washington D.C. correspondent for *The Daily Worker*. In the late 1940s, he worked for the *Worker* at its New York City headquarters before leaving the Party permanently in late 1956 (Tisdale, 2007). The FBI started surveilling Hall in the 1930s when he ran for Alabama’s congressional seat as a Communist Party candidate (Tisdale, 2007).

The FBI bureau in Albany, however, wanted to talk to him once he left the Party. They wanted information. They wanted Hall to name names. In a compromise, Hall penned a biographical sketch for the bureau in 1959 that outlined his time in the CPUSA. Hall wrote that he was “disturbed by the poverty of the tenant farmers, the exploitation of textile and lumber workers, and oppressed by the denial of human rights to Negroes” in explaining why he had initially joined the Party (FBI files, 1959, p.5). That activism and that passion within the Party caught the attention of the FBI in the Party’s formative years and, specifically, Hall. The bureau’s interest in Hall was significant because he served as director of District 17 (Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama) for the CPUSA in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Hall’s early FBI files, particularly in these sections being studied, tend to focus on his work in Alabama with Blacks and labor unions as he traveled the state trying to foment cooperation between the unions and the civil rights organizations. The FBI was particularly interested in his travels. His work as a journalist was printed in the *Worker* and the FBI had access, like everyone else, to what he reported. They were interested in his journalistic influence, but they were also as concerned with where he traveled professionally and with whom he visited in those travels. He traveled often to New Orleans to meet with labor leaders of the National Maritime Union and other trade groups.

In Alabama, Hall’s home phone was technically surveilled. His work phone was technically surveilled. The Birmingham bureau of the FBI generated weekly reports, at a minimum, on Hall. According to Schrecker (1998), the FBI had about 1,000 informants both inside the CPUSA and its related organizations during the 1940s and the 1950s. About half of those informers “were unpaid

volunteers” who exchanged inside information on the CPUSA for money to pay “their Party dues or Daily Worker subscriptions” (pp. 228-229). That level of surveillance began with the Dies Committee and continued with the passing of the Smith Act and later the McCarran Act. The McCarthy Committee also affected the level of scrutiny employed by the FBI on Hall and other members of the Party.

Two events in 1956, however, would change the trajectory of the FBI’s surveillance of both Hall and other members of the CPUSA. These events would also alter Hall’s path. Khrushchev’s 1956 speech outlined Joseph Stalin’s abuse of power. The reaction of American communists was almost immediate. Hall’s break with the Party would be permanent, but the Albany bureau of the FBI would continue to monitor his movements afterward, even generating a report on Hall’s vacation to Greece (FBI, 1968).

Framing

Framing is a theoretical framework that suggests issues can be described in a variety of viewpoints and interpretations (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 1993, 2010). Framing is “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Frames are also employed to define issues and problems in narratives (Cunningham & Browning, 2004). Frames are generated to influence political communication not just with other government officials but also with the public. Frames include words, adjectives, adverbs, and catch phrases that are used to ideologically connect by encoding and decoding messages (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 1993, 2010). Theoretically, frames are used to elicit certain responses to intentionally influence the way messages are received and decoded. Those who control the levers of power use framed messages to influence political behavior and, using official government documents, typically controlled by elites, influence political activity (Cunningham & Browning, 2004).

In the framing of communism in the United States, the political elites portrayed members of the CPUSA as being outside mainstream political thought and, actually, a threat to democracy. Terms or phrases such as subversive, radical, Red, communists, Marxists and Leninists were euphemistic for unpatriotic or unsupportive of American ideals. During the McCarthy era, for instance, if a person was labeled a communist, that was enough to lose a job, be ostracized in a community, be subpoenaed by Congress or become a target of the FBI. For those members of the Party, however, communism had certain economic and political implications. Members of the Party believed that the Great Depression was evidence that the American economic system had failed. Increasing disparities in wealth was another sign. Further, the lack of safety nets for average Americans was more evidence. Lastly, members of the Party saw the treatment of Blacks, whether through the lens of the judicial system or through the segregated school systems, as further evidence that the American system was seriously flawed.

In the case of Hall, his introduction to communism began when he enrolled at Columbia University and majored in economics while writing for both *The Varsity Review* and *The Young Communist League’s Student Review*. With his exposure to poverty while working in marketing for the Gulf, Mobile and Ohio railroad company in Alabama, Hall enrolled at Columbia to find solutions for the depressed agricultural industry in Alabama and for the abject poverty of the region. He also believed that segregation was not only a moral failing, but a structural impediment to American progress. The fact that Hall decided to run for Congress on a Communist Party ticket in the Deep South is evidence of his commitment to an ideology deemed anathema by the U.S. government.

It is noteworthy that after defecting from the Party, some members became ardent anti-communists, but most left the Party not because of one event but an accumulation of events (Almond, 1954). Despite the

collapse of the Party after the Khrushchev speech and the subsequent collapse of the Worker, the framing of communists as spies, saboteurs and as threats to democracy and capitalism continues. Communists have infiltrated college campuses and the secondary school system, according to critics. People who practice politics with labels such as progressive or liberal are labeled communists.

Research Questions

The framing of communism has had different meanings at different times. In the United States, the rise of a third party with political antecedents in labor, agriculture and collectivist ideology, along with a historical revolution in Russia, allowed for the development of a Communist Party in the 1920s (Barrett, 1999; Cohen, 1993; Fast, 1990; Kazin, 1995; Krugman, 1952). Existing research on communism and the FBI surveillance related to the Party focus on whether members of the Party were subverting or attempting to overthrow a democratic republic (Morgan, 2003; Russwurm, 2003; Weiner, 2012). Most of the existing literature is qualitative historical analyses of key political and cultural figures in the Party or of the U.S. government spy apparatus and the existing research cannot help us hypothesize about the framing of Hall and the FBI's surveillance of him. Therefore, the following research questions are tested.

RQ1: What were the topics of the documents across different FBI bureaus on RFH and his Party activities?

RQ2: How did different FBI bureaus frame RFH's activities?

RQ3a: What were the sources of information across the different FBI bureaus on RFH?

RQ3b: How did the FBI protect the identity of its sources across the different bureaus on RFH?

RQ3c: How was the redacted information gathered across bureaus related to different sources the FBI used to surveil RFH?

RQ4: How did the different FBI bureaus perceive the activities of RFH based on the documents?

METHODS

Sample

The study population consisted of all FBI documents on RFH (N = 1865 pages) in eight sections (133, 352, 323, 194, 194, 194, 268, and 207 pages), which were secured by the researchers from the FBI through the Freedom of Information Act. The documents were from May 24, 1940, to December 9, 1959, and 51 (3.55%) of the data did not have dates on them. After excluding the repetitive pages of the documents, most of which were copies or summaries of the earlier reports, we brought down the sample size to N = 420 unique pages. For longer reports, we only included the first pages in the sample. The reason for excluding the repetitive pages was to reduce the chance of recoding the same data more than once (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010).

Measures

The measures were identified based on a pilot study by the researchers on the literature and data related to FBI surveillance of communism in the U.S., which resulted in the development of our codebook for the study. The variables were bureau, topic, frames, sources, redaction, and activities. Bureaus were categorized as Alabama, New York City, Albany, Washington D.C., and Other. Topics were Hall, *The Daily Worker*, CPUSA, trips, administrative work, and other. Frames were categorized as radical, Communist Party, civil rights activist, functionary, and other. Sources were categorized as surveillance, informants, mixed, media, government officials, redacted, not mentioned, and other. Redactions were classified as b2, mixed, b7c, none, and other. Activities were categorized as against national security, security index, and other.

Intercoder Reliability

The first author coded all the sample (N = 420). For intercoder reliability, 10% of the sample (randomly selected 42 cases) were coded by the second researcher and Cohen’s Kappa was calculated. The results showed 100% agreement among the coders for date, bureau, and redaction categories. For other variables, the Kappa coefficient ranged from .792 to .905 (.837 for sources, .843 for framing, .845 for activities, and .905 for subject), which showed a high level of reliability among the coders (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010).

RESULTS

A total of N = 420 unique pages of the FBI documents were quantitatively content analyzed. Using a series of chi-square analyses, we examined the data to answer our research questions.

Research question 1 was about the topics of the FBI documents across different bureaus. A Chi-square analysis found significant differences among the bureaus for topics ($\chi^2 = 43.438$; $df = 20$; $p < .002$). As shown on Table 1, the FBI bureau in Albany significantly had more documents on the topic of Hall (66.7%) than the bureaus in New York (48%) and Alabama (55.7%). The New York bureau significantly focused more on administrative paperwork than Albany (8.9%) Washington D.C. (13.3%) and Alabama (15.2%). The Alabama bureau significantly had more documents on the CPUSA (19%) than other bureaus. This means that the Albany bureau focused more on Hall the person rather than Hall as a Party functionary while the Alabama bureau concentrated more on him and his Party-affiliated activities.

Table 1
Topics of the FBI Documents Across Different Bureaus

Topic	Bureaus					Total
	Alabama	NYC	Albany	W D.C.	Other	
Hall	44 (55.7%)	24 (48.0%)	30 (66.7%)	106 (58.6%)	23 (35.6%)	227 (54.0%)
Daily Worker	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.0%)	1 (2.2%)	15 (8.3%)	5 (7.7%)	22 (5.2%)
CPUSA	15 (19.0%)	7 (14.0%)	7 (15.6%)	15 (8.3%)	7 (10.8%)	51 (12.1%)
Trips	8 (10.1%)	5 (10.0%)	2 (4.4%)	17 (9.4%)	13 (20.0%)	45 (10.7%)
Admin Work	12 (15.2%)	13 (26.0%)	4 (8.9%)	24 (13.3%)	13 (20.0%)	66 (15.7%)
Other	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.2%)	4 (2.2%)	4 (6.2%)	9 (2.1%)
Total	79	50	45	181	65	420

$\chi^2 = 43.438$; $df = 20$; $p < .002$

Research question 2 asked about the framing of information across different bureaus and found significant differences ($\chi^2 = 35.354$; $df = 16$; $p < .004$). Even though all bureaus had the frame of communist activist in more than 84% of the documents, the New York, Washington D.C. and Alabama bureaus significantly had more such frames (92%, 88.4%, and 84.8%) than Albany (64.4%) (See Table 2). The FBI bureau in Albany had significantly more frames of functionary (33.3) than other bureaus. The difference in framing can be attributed to Hall having already left the Party when the Albany bureau

began its surveillance of his activities. Thus, the label of Party functionary was more accurate than that of communist activist.

Table 2
Prominent Frames of the FBI Documents Across Bureaus

Frames	Bureaus					Total
	Alabama	NYC	Albany	W D.C.	Other	
Radical	6 (7.6%)	1 (2.0%)	1 (2.2%)	12 (6.6%)	1 (1.5%)	21 (5.0%)
Communist Activist	67 (84.8%)	46 (92.0%)	29 (64.4%)	160 (88.4%)	53 (81.5%)	355 (84.5%)
Civil Rights Activist	2 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.5%)	3 (0.7%)
Functionary	3 (3.8%)	3 (6.0%)	15 (33.3%)	9 (5.0%)	4 (6.2%)	34 (8.1%)
Other	1 (1.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (9.2%)	7 (1.7%)
Total	79	50	45	181	65	420

$\chi^2 = 35.354$; $df = 16$; $p < .004$

Research question 3a was about the sources of information across different bureaus and we found significant differences ($\chi^2 = 104.456$; $df = 28$; $p < .001$). Table 3 shows the Albany bureau significantly relied on more government officials (42.2%) than other bureaus (16%, 21.5%, and 23.8%).

Table 3
How Was Information Gathered Across Bureaus

Sources	Bureaus					Total
	Alabama	NYC	Albany	W D.C.	Other	
Surveillance	28 (35.4%)	2 (4.0%)	1 (2.2%)	33 (18.2%)	2 (3.1%)	66 (15.7%)
Informants	26 (32.9%)	11 (22.0%)	11 (24.4%)	42 (23.2%)	10 (15.4%)	100 (23.3%)
Mixed	2 (2.5%)	5 (10.0%)	1 (2.2%)	12 (6.6%)	1 (1.5%)	21 (5.0%)
Media	2 (2.5%)	1 (2.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (1.7%)	3 (4.6%)	9 (2.1%)
Gov Official	17 (21.5%)	8 (16.0%)	19 (42.2%)	43 (23.8%)	23 (35.4%)	110 (26.2%)
Redacted	1 (1.3%)	5 (10.0%)	8 (17.8%)	9 (5.0%)	2 (3.1%)	25 (6.0%)
Not Mentioned	2 (2.5%)	16 (32.0%)	5 (11.1%)	33 (18.2%)	22 (33.8%)	78 (18.6%)
Other	1 (1.3%)	2 (4.0%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (3.3%)	2 (3.1%)	11 (2.6%)
Total	79	50	45	181	65	420

$\chi^2 = 104.456$; $df = 28$; $p < .001$

The Alabama bureau employed significantly more surveillance tactics (35.4%) and employed more informants (32.9%) than other bureaus. The New York bureau did not mention its sources of information significantly more (32%) than other bureaus (2.5%, 11.1%, and (18.2%). The differences could be attributed to the size of the FBI bureau. At the time of the surveillance of Hall, a plurality of FBI agents were stationed in Washington D.C. while the second biggest percentage would have been assigned to the New York City bureau. That’s not the only explanation. Once Hall moved to upstate New York after leaving the Party, the FBI assigned the Albany bureau to surveil his movements in small towns where informants included the postmaster or where Hall banked.

Research question 3b asked how the differences in the redactions of sources occurred across the FBI bureaus. We found significant differences among the bureaus ($\chi^2 = 35.354$; $df = 16$; $p < .004$). The Albany bureau significantly had more b7c redactions (60%) than other bureaus (35.9%, 39.2%, and 46%). It is important to mention that 42.1% of the entire redacted data were coded as b7c, which means an unwarranted invasion of privacy, according to the U.S. Department of Justice (OIP Coded Report, N.D.). The Washington D.C. bureau significantly had more non-redacted documents (34.8%) than other bureaus (18%, 22.2%, and 27.8%). The Alabama bureau significantly had more mixed redactions (27.8%) than other bureaus (8.9%, 18%, and 18.8%). Most of the FBI documents had some form of redaction, but the primary FBI code labels in the Hall file included b7c, b2, b7D and, occasionally, b1. Often, the FBI agent code labels were coded as mixed, meaning, more likely, an agent and an informant contributed to the report.

Table 4
Redactions of Information of the FBI Documents Across Bureaus

Redactions	Bureaus					Total
	Alabama	NYC	Albany	W D.C.	Other	
B2	3 (3.8%)	6 (12.0%)	1 (2.2%)	12 (6.6%)	1 (1.5%)	23 (5.5%)
Mixed	22 (27.8%)	9 (18.0%)	4 (8.9%)	34 (18.8%)	4 (6.2%)	73 (17.4%)
b7c	31 (39.2%)	23 (46.0%)	27 (60.0%)	65 (35.9%)	31 (47.7%)	177 (42.1%)
None	22 (27.8%)	9 (18.0%)	10 (22.2%)	63 (34.8%)	27 (41.5%)	131 (31.2%)
Other	1 (1.3%)	3 (8.0%)	3 (6.7%)	7 (3.9%)	2 (3.1%)	16 (3.8%)
Total	79	50	45	181	65	420

$\chi^2 = 35.354$; $df = 16$; $p < .004$

Research question 3c was on the relationship between the redactions and sources of information and we found significant differences ($\chi^2 = 166.232$; $df = 28$; $p < .001$). The documents redacted with more than one code were related to informants significantly more than other categories (24.9% and 26.1%). The redaction code b7c was significantly related to government officials (33.3%) than other redacted codes (5.5% and 13%) (See Tale 5). The mixed category could mean that information was generated from a combination of paid or unpaid informants.

Table 5
Redactions in Relation to Information Sources

Sources	Redaction					Total
	B2	Mixed	b7c	None	Other	
Surveillance	6 (26.1%)	6 (8.2%)	15 (8.5%)	38 (29.0%)	1 (6.3%)	66 (15.7%)
Informants	6 (26.1%)	44 (60.3%)	44 (24.9%)	6 (4.6%)	0 (0.0%)	100 (23.3%)
Mixed	2 (8.7%)	7 (9.6%)	10 (5.6%)	2 (1.5%)	0 (0.0%)	21 (5.0%)
Media	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.4%)	1 (0.6%)	7 (5.3%)	0 (0.0%)	9 (2.1%)
Gov Official	3 (13.0%)	4 (5.5%)	59 (33.3%)	39 (29.8%)	5 (31.3%)	110 (26.2%)
Redacted	1 (4.3%)	6 (8.2%)	14 (7.9%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (25.0%)	25 (6.0%)
Not Mentioned	5 (21.7%)	5 (6.8%)	28 (15.8%)	36 (27.5%)	4 (25.0%)	78 (18.6%)
Other	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (3.4%)	3 (2.3%)	2 (12.5%)	11 (2.6%)
Total	23	73	177	131	16	420

$$\chi^2 = 166.232; df = 28; p < .001$$

Research question 4 asked about the perception of RFH's activities in the eyes of the FBI based on the documents across different bureaus and significant differences were found ($\chi^2 = 70; df = 8; p < .001$). As Table 6 shows, RFH was viewed for security index in relation to his connection to CPUSA in 80% of the entire FBI documents and only 17.9% of the documents was on threats to national security. Albany and New York bureaus surveilled RFH significantly as a security index than Alabama and Washington D.C. Meanwhile, the Alabama bureau significantly surveilled him for national security threats (39.2%) more so than other bureaus (0%, 6%, and 19%). Those security threats came under the umbrella of a visit to London at the Foreign Ministers' Conference and his visits the embassies of eastern European countries in Washington D.C.

Table 6
Subversive Activities in Documents Across Bureaus

Activities	Bureaus					Total
	Alabam	NYC	Bureaus Albany	W D.C.	Other	
Against National security	31 (39.2%)	3 (6.0%)	0 (0.0%)	35 (19.3%)	6 (9.2%)	75 (17.9%)
Security Index	47 (59.5%)	47 (94.0%)	44 (97.8%)	146 (80.7%)	52 (80.0%)	336 (80.0%)
Other	1 (1.3%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.2%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (10.8%)	9 (2.1%)
Total	79	50	45	181	65	420

$\chi^2 = 70; df = 8; p < .001$

DISCUSSION

This study is a content analysis of the FBI surveillance on Hall and the corresponding documents field agents generated based on paid and unpaid informants along with technical (telephonic) surveillance of his work telephone and his home telephone. Agents and informants not only surveilled Hall’s movements and meetings, but what he wrote as a journalist for *The Daily Worker* in his assignments covering Congress in Washington D.C. and his time as a columnist for the Party newspaper in New York City. Based on these documents, the FBI did not routinely approach Hall for an interview except during his time on the *Worker* in New York City, which is documented in the FBI files. Hall, approached by agents on a street in New York City, waved off the two agents who previously contacted him and who had asked for an interview in 1955. A significant number of American communists joined the movement out of a sense of social justice and as a response to the Great Depression. Some joined because of the Bolshevik Revolution, others because of the Great Depression, and yet others over the lack of government resources for the poor. It is in this vein that Hall enters the equation. Working for the Gulf, Mobile, and Ohio Railroad company, Hall, in his journeys, witnessed an agricultural depression that had followed the end of World War I. Also, the persistent Jim Crow laws that perpetuated a two-tier system of justice contributed to his political disaffection. The main findings of the study are discussed below in three thematic sections.

What Was the FBI Looking for And Why?

To answer the “what” question, we found that Hall was the primary topic of discussion in more than 50% of the coded FBI documents followed by administrative paperwork, and then CPUSA (Communist Party of the United States of America). Hall’s standing in the CPUSA, specifically his work as District 17 director in Birmingham, Alabama, and his subsequent work as a journalist for *The Daily Worker* in Washington D.C. and later in New York City drew significant FBI attention and resources. In Albany, New York, the FBI focused on Hall significantly more than the FBI bureau in Alabama, while the Alabama bureau significantly focused on CPUSA in the documents. The Alabama bureau’s focus on the CPUSA category while he served as a district director reflects the bureau’s concern about the influence of the Party on civil rights and on union issues rather than Hall the person.

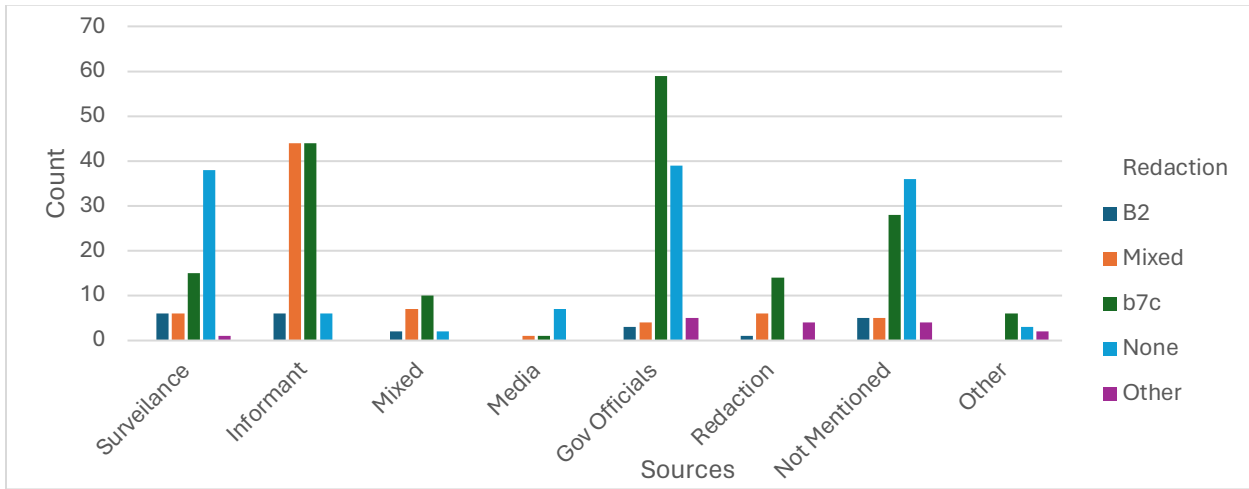
The FBI gathered information using government officials (primarily FBI field agents), informants (paid and unpaid) and surveillance (government officials and telephonic). In Alabama, the bureau was relying on surveillance and informants to gather information on Hall more so than other bureaus where he lived. Albany, in contrast, relied more on government officials, mainly the postmaster in Warrensburg, New York, and also the county sheriff.

Protecting the Identity of the FBI’s Sources

The FBI used different forms of redaction with the most common being b7c (42%) followed by a combination of redactions, most of which included b7c. We found, based on the analysis, that more than 30% are category b7c redactions associated with government officials and is followed by informants (24.9%). The FBI redaction codes are assigned primarily to agents, whose identities are redacted in all but a few cases. To differentiate between agents and paid/unpaid informants, the structure of the sentence would include the word ‘informant’ followed by the redacted name of the person. To differentiate, a sentence would include the word ‘agent’ before the agent’s redacted name. So, the word

informant and the word agent were used to distinguish who provided the information despite the name being redacted.

Figure 1. Sources of the FBI in Hall Documents



Was Hall a Security Risk?

There are contradictory assessments of Hall as a security risk. For example, the FBI in 1944 characterized Hall as “a potential sabotage agent” primarily because he was entering the U.S. Army. It should be noted that the bureaus that surveilled Hall, including the bureaus in Birmingham, Washington D.C. and New York City, exchanged memoranda and reports on the fact that the bureau would no longer surveil Hall while he was in the military. Once he finished his time in the Army, the FBI then again took up surveillance of Hall and his work as a journalist for the *Worker*. In 1953, however, the New York FBI bureau generated a report that did not tag Hall as “a Top Functionary.”

In 80% of the coded documents, the FBI described Hall using its Security Index code, which was, literally, index cards created to track people whom the government deemed a possible threat to national security. In 17.9% of the activities coded as a direct threat against national security, those documents included references to Hall’s international travels and meetings with foreign diplomats. For example, Hall traveled to London in late 1947 as a representative of the *Worker* to cover the Foreign Ministers’ Conference before also covering events in France and Italy. The national security threat label was also used when he visited the Russian and Rumanian embassies while working in the Washington D.C. bureau of the *Worker* after World War II.

There was a significant difference in how the different bureaus framed Hall. The most used frame for Hall was “communist activist” and was most often used in the Birmingham, Washington D.C. and New York City. The Albany bureau would occasionally surveil Hall—using both the post office and the sheriff’s office—after he had resigned from the Party. Also in the data, Hall was framed as a functionary, which means he attended meetings, met fellow travelers for lunch or dinner at district meetings in places like Fort Worth, Texas, and New Orleans, Louisiana. Albany framed him significantly more as a functionary, which can be explained because he had left the Party and was working for a newspaper in upstate New York. In another frame, Hall was considered a radical in 5% of

the total data, which suggests that the term radical was a label seldom applied by the FBI at that time; however, the term was applied more often in the Birmingham and Washington D.C. bureaus than the New York City and Albany bureaus. This can be partially explained because of Hall’s activities as the district director in Birmingham, where he had the latitude to recruit new members and to mobilize the unions around the metal extraction businesses in Birmingham and the Black sharecroppers and tenant farmers of the Black Belt. The possible recruitment of union workers and Blacks to the Party threatened the perceived social contract that whites wanted to maintain. Thus, the FBI turned its attention to Hall as he took a more public stance against the prevailing social order of the South. Also, he was the center of the FBI Birmingham office’s attention because he was the leader of the Party in the region.

Government Bureaucracy and Duplication of Reports

One of the challenges to sampling FBI data was the sheer bureaucracy of duplicative reporting required from the central office in Washington D.C. For example, in 1953, when Hall moved to *The Daily Worker* in New York City, that field office asked for all reports pertaining to his time in both Washington D.C. and in Birmingham. Any reports agents generated during those periods of the mid-1930s through the late 1940s would have to be copied and sent to the New York City bureau. Another example are the personal descriptions of Hall that were repeated throughout the reports as they are copied and sent to a new bureau in the vicinity of where Hall was employed. Copying reports for different bureaus could be challenging besides also being duplicative. After receiving the reports, the New York City bureau noted that reports from Birmingham for the years 1941 to 1944 were “not in accordance with existing report writing instructions. It is noted that in some instances on informant pages four symbols are assigned to two or three informants which are grouped together, thus making it impossible to determine which symbols were assigned to each of the particular informants.” Also included in the reports sent to the NYC bureau is a 107-page report agents in Washington D.C. generated. The longest correlated summary in Hall’s FBI files ran to 557 pages, which comprised all of sections four, five, and six. Another summary in section seven ran to 200 pages. The length of these summaries is an indicator of the duplicative bureaucracy of a government agency.

After Hall moved to Washington D.C., the bureau in the capitol requested all previous reports from the Birmingham bureau. The agents in D.C. complained about what they deemed to be missing reports. They wanted information on Hall before 1944, which the Birmingham office failed to provide.

In other words, a majority of the FBI documents in the Hall file were not unique pieces of information. For example, the physical description of Hall when he served as district director in Birmingham varies little from the descriptions included more than a decade later in the reports emanating from either New York City or Albany. In reports dated March 1950, October 1950, December 1950 and July 1953, the description is that he smokes a pipe continuously, walks with a long gait and drinks excessively. The descriptors seldom varied throughout the sections.

Thus, this is evidence that the bureaus seldom updated descriptions and information included in previous reports. Why? In the age before computer editing and electronic data bases, updating information in reports typed on manual typewriters was a significant challenge when generating multiple daily reports.

LIMITATIONS

Despite the significant contributions of this study to the history of communism in the United States and FBI surveillance, limitations exist because of significant redactions, the ability to interpret the

intent of the surveillance and the intent of what the agents interpreted to be a security risk or potential harm to the United States during the middle of the 20th Century. This is one of the first quantitative studies of FBI records, specifically related to a member of the CPUSA. That said, we did not have a strong basis to rely on for our measures and thus developed our own code book. Future research can use this study as a foundation to further analyze similar data.

CONCLUSION

A study of the FBI surveillance of Hall as a member of the Communist Party found that he was not framed as a significant security threat and was viewed mostly as a communist activist. This is despite agents generating more than 1,800 pages of documents pertaining to Hall and his association with CPUSA. The FBI read the *Worker*, looking for signs of subversive propaganda or anti-democratic or anti-capitalist content. The FBI included the *Worker* articles in the reports or quoted liberally from Hall's columns in the newspaper. Obviously, the FBI was concerned about the influence of communism on anti-democratic principles.

Eighteen hundred pages represents a significant time and ideological commitment to ferreting out communism in the 1930s, the 1940s and the 1950s from an average member of the CPUSA. It is exceptional that someone labeled a "communist activist" could generate that much attention from the federal government. Almost seventy years after the FBI generated these reports and more than twenty years after these documents were released under the Freedom of Information Act, it is remarkable that significant redactions inhibit the ability of researchers to write a more complete history. Whether the surveillance was out of fear of a communist takeover or infiltration or whether Hall was an actual threat to democracy, it is unclear in the FBI field reports.

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