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Booting a Tramp: Charlie Chaplin, the FBI, and the Construction of the Subversive Image in Red Scare America

JOHN SBARDELLATI and TONY SHAW

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This article examines the battle over popular culture in the age of McCarthyism. The Federal Bureau of Investigation, under J. Edgar Hoover, targeted Charlie Chaplin because of his status as a cultural icon and as part of its broader investigation of Hollywood. Some of Chaplin's films were considered "communist propaganda," but because Chaplin was not a member of the Communist Party, he was not among those investigated by HUAC in 1947. Nevertheless, he was vulnerable to protests by the American Legion and other patriotic groups because of both his sexual and political unorthodoxy. Yet, although countersubversives succeeded in driving Chaplin out of the country, they failed to build a consensus that Chaplin was a threat to the nation. Chaplin's story testifies to both the awesome power of the countersubversive campaign at mid-century and to some of its limitations as well.

One day in early 1942 Groucho Marx was busily trimming the rose bushes at the edge of the grounds of his Beverly Hills mansion. The job had fallen to him since the internment of his Japanese American gardener in the aftermath of Tokyo's attack on Pearl Harbor. An elderly woman passing by stopped and, failing to recognize the comedian, asked him how much he was paid for tending such a palatial residence. "Oh, I don't get paid in dollars," replied Marx. "The lady of the house just lets me sleep with her."¹

This case of the mistaken identity of one of Hollywood's all-time-great comedians would seem, on the face of it, to have been repeated a few years later—although with potentially far more serious consequences—when, in 1948, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) endeavored to "determine whether or not [Charlie]

1. Cited in Stefan Kanfer, *Groucho: The Life and Times of Julius Henry Marx* (New York, 2000), 267.

CHAPLIN was or is engaged in Soviet espionage activities.”² For the FBI to suspect that one of the world’s most famous film stars, a man worth upwards of \$30 million, was plotting to overthrow capitalism suggests at the very least the organization had its wires crossed. However, like the tramp in *Modern Times* who gets caught in the cogs of modern industry, Charlie Chaplin, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, found himself entangled in the “machinery” of McCarthyism.³ Although some historians now question the extent to which anti-communist hysteria swept the United States during this period, the early years of the Cold War undeniably witnessed numerous attempts to purge the culture of anything that could be deemed subversive, including abstract modern art and the story of Robin Hood.⁴ Yet Chaplin was no spy, nor was he a communist. Even had he been, he certainly was not a threat to the nation. Chaplin attracted the attention of countersubversives like FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover because of his prominent status as a cultural icon. That FBI officials treated Chaplin as a threat to national security shows the extent to which cultural “subversion” and more tangible forms of subversion, such as espionage, were conflated.

2. Memo, Special Agent in Charge (hereafter SAC), Los Angeles to J. Edgar Hoover, Sept. 3, 1948, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090. (The serial number is difficult to read here, but it is probably 35.) This file and other files cited were obtained directly from the FBI and had been “pre-processed” (in other words, it was not necessary to file a request for them under the Freedom of Information Act). The file numbers included in the footnotes indicate classification, file number, and serial number. Files with the prefix “100” are from Chaplin’s Domestic Security File. His file number here is 127090 (meaning his was the 127,090th domestic security case opened by the FBI). The numbers that follow 100-127090 are the serial numbers, indicating specific entries. Cited below is file 31-68496. The “31” classification indicates a White Slave Traffic Act investigation; his was the 68,496th such case investigated by the Bureau. The other FBI file cited below is the COMPIC file (Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry). This too is a Domestic Security file (classification “100”); COMPIC was the 138,754th such investigation undertaken. These files are all available on microfilm (edited by Dan Leab) and in the FBI’s Reading Room.

3. For possibly the best brief analysis of how the “machinery” of McCarthyism operated and interacted, see Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston, 1998), ix–xviii.

4. Peter Filene has argued that historians have overstated the “national paranoia over communism” and that the Cold War was primarily an elite affair. Peter Filene, “‘Cold War Culture’ Doesn’t Say It All,” in Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert, eds., *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington, D.C., 2001), 157. Conversely, Richard Fried has outlined the grass-roots aspects of McCarthyism, including these episodes about Robin Hood and modern art, in Richard Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (New York, 1990), 31–34.

Charlie Chaplin's troubles in the 1940s and 1950s constitute a valuable case-study of McCarthyite persecution. His story offers insight into the construction of the subversive image and demonstrates that Cold War fears were intertwined with more traditional concerns and prejudices. Not only was Chaplin attacked as both a political subversive, because of his leftist views and associations, but as a sexual subversive as well. In addition, Chaplin was not an American citizen and had never shown interest in becoming one. His alien status, combined with his seemingly threatening political views and sexual misbehavior, provided ammunition for those who sought to transform Chaplin's image from popular star to despised subversive. The "evidence" against Chaplin was not fabricated, although his adversaries relied on truths and half-truths, twisting contexts to put words and deeds in the worst possible light. This was the process by which the subversive image was constructed.⁵

The Chaplin case, moreover, also documents the propagandistic intentions underlying the repression. The attack on Chaplin had been fueled and legitimized by fears of motion-picture propaganda, and it strengthened the stigma of subversion that many had long attached to Hollywood. Indeed, as Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund have argued, the investigation of the entertainment industry during the Cold War era had symbolic purposes, for "Hollywood was only the tip of an iceberg, but it was a flashing neon tip that captivated the nation's attention."⁶ In many ways, the crusade against Chaplin succeeded. In September 1952, after Chaplin and his family set sail for a European tour to promote his new film *Limelight*, Attorney General James McGranery, after consulting with FBI Director Hoover, revoked Chaplin's reentry permit, citing "grave moral charges" and allegations of communist associations. In order to return to the country that had been his home for forty years, Chaplin would have to appear before an Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) board to answer questions about his politics and morality. After

5. Charlie Chaplin's biographers have offered differing interpretations of Chaplin's run-ins with the state. For example, whereas David Robinson and Charles Maland see Chaplin as a victim of McCarthyism, Kenneth Lynn blames Chaplin's troubles on his supposed moral depravity. Kenneth S. Lynn, *Charlie Chaplin and His Times* (New York, 1997); Charles S. Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture: the Evolution of a Star Image* (Princeton, N.J., 1989); David Robinson, *Chaplin: His Life and Art* (New York, 1985).

6. Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-1960* (Berkeley, 1979), xiv.

years of harassment by the government, the press, and organizations such as the American Legion, Chaplin elected not to return.⁷ *Lime-light* would be his last American film. But, as this article shows, if Chaplin's foes succeeded in driving him out of the country (and most importantly, out of Hollywood), they failed in the larger propagandistic task.

“Influence upon the minds and culture”

J. Edgar Hoover, the most powerful twentieth-century American countersubversive, had taken an interest in Chaplin since 1922. The earliest Chaplin files of the Justice Department's Bureau of Investigation (formally renamed the FBI in 1935) already dealt with subjects that remained of interest to Chaplin's enemies throughout the 1940s and 1950s: allegations that he associated with radicals, made contributions to the party and leftist labor organizations, and intended to insert radical ideas into his films.⁸

The bulk of Chaplin's file, however, concentrates on the period after 1942 and documents the exhaustive efforts of FBI officials to connect Chaplin to movements, organizations, ideas, or individuals that they considered subversive. The contents testify to the “guilt by association” mentality of the era. The FBI tried to link Chaplin to the Communist Party and to various “front” groups such as the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, Russian War Relief, Artists' Front to Win the War, the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, and other organizations that included communists.⁹ Chaplin's personal associations—radical émigrés like Hanns Eisler, Lion Feuchtwanger, and Lubomir Linhart, labor leader Harry Bridges, or Hollywood radicals like Paul Jarrico, Herbert Biberman, and Dalton Trumbo—all seemed evidence that Chaplin was a red.¹⁰ Chaplin not only maintained these relationships when the new political cli-

7. “Chaplin is Facing Barriers to Re-entry from Abroad,” *New York Times*, Sept. 20, 1952, p. 1; “Chaplin Says He Will Not Return to U.S.,” in *ibid.*, April 18, 1953, p. 34.

8. Report, Agent A. A. Hopkins, Los Angeles, to Director, Aug. 15, 1922, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090. (The serial number is difficult to read here, but it appears to be X1).

9. See, for example, Report, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, March 13, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-13; memo, D. Milton Ladd to Hoover, Aug. 6, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-18.

10. See, for example, Report, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, March 13, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-13; for one media example, see *Monsieur Verdoux* press conference discussed below.

mate of the Cold War caused some to distance themselves from radical friends but loyally supported them when they faced troubles of their own.¹¹ Yet Chaplin's personal troubles resulted not merely from his associations but from his own political activity as well. In speeches during World War II, calling for a second front, he addressed his audience as "comrades" and praised the communist ally; he expressed contempt for red-baiters and called for reform at home. Chaplin, like other progressives (in the Popular Front sense of the term), felt that the Great Depression was a product of raw and unregulated capitalism and that America must undergo a change: "I don't want the old rugged individualism . . . rugged for a few, ragged for many."¹² By expressing admiration for the Soviet ally, calling for toleration of communists at home, and proclaiming a need for economic and social reform, Chaplin's wartime speeches provided ammunition for the countersubversives of the late 1940s and early 1950s.¹³

Although Chaplin's foes often attacked his political activity more directly than his films, his status as an independent and influential filmmaker concerned them. Anticommunists like Hoover fretted over the perceived political threat of communism, whether in the form of espionage, labor activity, or efforts to fight racial injustice, but were equally troubled by the cultural threat from the left.¹⁴ They worried that communists could pose as "ardent patriots," insidiously infiltrating the nation's institutions. FBI officials considered Hollywood among the most important of these, for they un-

11. Memo, Ladd to Hoover, Aug. 6, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-18; Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 255–256. For example, in June 1947 Chaplin joined a group effort urging that the trials of communists Eugene Dennis, Leon Josephson, and Gerhardt Eisler (brother of Chaplin's close friend, Hanns Eisler) be postponed. Also, he signed a statement challenging HUAC's citations of contempt against the Hollywood Ten, and when Hanns Eisler faced deportation proceedings in the fall of 1947, Chaplin sent a telegram to Pablo Picasso in Paris asking him to help in coordinating protest.

12. Memo, Ladd to Hoover, Aug. 6, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-18.

13. For instance, Ed Sullivan utilized this tactic of invoking the past in 1947 when he criticized Chaplin for supporting the Russian ally instead of entertaining American troops, asking of the comedian, "is you is or is you ain't our baby?" Press clipping, Ed Sullivan column in *Washington-Times Herald*, April 12, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-15.

14. See Gerald Horne, *Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930–1950: Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds, & Trade Unionists* (Austin, Tex., 2001); Kenneth O'Reilly, "Racial Matters": *The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960–1972* (New York, 1989); Richard Gid Powers, *Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (New York, 1987), 275–311.

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derstood the film industry to be “one of the greatest, if not the very greatest, influence upon the minds and culture” of people the world over. They believed that all leftist activity in Hollywood was part of a grand design to capture the screen for “production of a type of motion picture favorable to Communism and the Soviet Union.” They viewed even labor activity as part of the scheme, reporting “the Communists must try to capture the labor unions for, if this could be done, they could exert much influence in the nature and type of pictures produced, and thus save the Soviet cause.”¹⁵ Bureau officials thus became especially concerned that a filmmaker like Chaplin, whose popular appeal was astounding, might intend to spread agitprop. Such thinking was expressed by Richard B. Hood, Special Agent in Charge of the Los Angeles Office, who in March 1944 sent Hoover an article from a leftist publication, emphasizing this passage: “There are men and women in far corners of the world who never have heard of Jesus Christ; yet they know and love Charlie Chaplin. So when Chaplin makes a picture like ‘The Great Dictator,’ his thoughts reach a far greater audience than do the newspapers, the magazines or the radio—and in picture words that all can understand.”¹⁶ For the FBI, the cultural Cold War had already started.

Fears of propaganda moved center stage during the early post-

15. Report, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, Aug. 24, 1943, and Report, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, Oct. 11, 1943, both in COMMUNIST INFILTRATION OF THE MOTION PICTURE INDUSTRY, FBI 100-138754. This file is available on microfilm: Daniel J. Leab, ed., *Communist Activity in the Entertainment Industry: FBI Surveillance Files on Hollywood, 1942–1958* (Bethesda, Md., 1991).

16. Interestingly, this passage was first included not in Chaplin’s security file but in his White Slave Traffic Act file, thereby revealing that even in their Mann Act investigation of Chaplin (discussed below), the Bureau was deeply concerned about his political activity. Letter, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, March 14, 1944, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 31-68496-225. The attached article was from *Rob Wagner’s Script*, vol. 30, number 674, March 4, 1944 (this apparently was an independent periodical published by Rob Wagner in Beverly Hills, to which the FBI referred as a “magazine” and as a “Beverly Hills scratch sheet”). *The Great Dictator* (1940), Chaplin’s brilliant satire of fascism and the most commercially successful of all his films, aroused the ire of U.S. isolationists. Moreover, its closing speech, in which the Jewish barber equated the Hitler menace with the exploitation of big business, was interpreted by the FBI as “nothing more than subtle Communist propaganda.” On this and the film generally, see memo, Ladd to Hoover, Aug. 6, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-18; Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s* (Berkeley, 1997), 39, 466, 479; “Chaplin is called for movie inquiry,” *New York Times*, Sept. 14, 1941, p. 41; Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 184; Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (New York, 1987), 44; Lynn, *Charlie Chaplin and His Times*, 400; Robinson, *Chaplin: His Life and Art*, 503; Robert Cole, “Anglo-American Anti-Fascist Pro-

war years. The onset of the Cold War, with its heightened anxieties about national security, coincided with and contributed to broader ideological shifts that bolstered the claims of countersubversives. Liberals had eschewed a reform impulse and reached accommodation with big business, especially during the war. Nationalism too was in flux, for critiques of capitalism, which had been woven into nationalist rhetoric of the 1930s, were no longer acceptable forms of discourse.¹⁷ For these reasons, in the “McCarthy era” dissent became equated with disloyalty. In this political and ideological context, Chaplin was surely playing with fire with his 1947 film *Monsieur Verdoux*.

Set in France during the Great Depression, the film tells the story of Henri Verdoux, a bank clerk who finds himself unemployed as a result of the stock market crash. Not willing to let his wife and child go hungry, Verdoux goes into business for himself—he marries and then kills several rich widows. Ultimately he is brought to trial, where he argues that he is the product of contemporary civilization: “As for being a mass killer—does not the world encourage it? Is it not building weapons of destruction for the sole purpose of mass killing? Has it not blown unsuspecting women and little children to pieces, and done it very scientifically? As a mass killer, I’m an amateur by comparison.” Although the film is set in the interwar period, Chaplin later acknowledged that this reference to weapons of mass destruction was an implicit form of atomic protest. Yet the film also critiqued the rapacious tendencies of modern industry. Throughout the picture Verdoux insists that his work is “business,” and in the end he claims that the only difference between his deeds and those of the financiers and arms manufacturers was one of scale: “One murder makes a villain, millions a hero. . . numbers sanctify, my good fellow.”¹⁸ Similar critiques of war profiteering had resided within the mainstream culture of the 1930s. The idea that

paganda in Time of Neutrality,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 21 (2001), 137–152.

17. Alan Brinkley, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 37–62; Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J., 2001), 238–267.

18. *Monsieur Verdoux*, directed by Charles Chaplin, 1947. For Chaplin’s comments about the film’s relevance to the new horrors unleashed by the atomic bomb, see “Charlie Chaplin’s *Monsieur Verdoux* Press Conference,” *Film Comment*, 5 (Winter 1969), 38–39. This is the only known full transcript of the 1947 press conference that was recorded by radio producer George Wallach, but it was not published until 1969. At the conference,

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big business dragged Woodrow Wilson into World War I, for example, had been propagated by the Senate's Special Committee Investigating the Munitions Industry chaired by Gerald Nye.¹⁹ If Chaplin was now deemed subversive for voicing such views, this was because American culture had changed.

Certainly not everyone repudiated *Monsieur Verdoux*. Indeed, the National Board of Review selected it as the best picture of 1947, while the respected critic, James Agee, considered the film "one of the few indispensable works of our time," calling it a "great poem" about the predicament of modern man who is driven by great compassion to commit even greater acts of murder.²⁰ But these were notable exceptions, for *Monsieur Verdoux* was ill received by press and public alike. *Unbiased Opinions*, a publication of Fox West Coast Theaters, opined in its review: "Exonerating the individual and blaming society for all evils is a very wrong kind of philosophy."²¹ *Life* also criticized the film, deriding Chaplin's "silly comparison between [Verdoux's] small-scale killings and the mass homicide of modern war."²² At a New York press conference for *Monsieur Verdoux* on April 14, 1947, few reporters addressed the movie itself, inquiring instead whether Chaplin was a communist or a communist sympathizer and why he had not become a citizen. They even asked him to name names:

Question: Mr. Chaplin, according to a report from Hollywood you are a personal friend of Hanns Eisler, the composer?

Chaplin: I am. I am very proud of the fact.

Question: Are you aware of the fact that his brother is the Soviet agent, so attested by . . .

Chaplin: I know nothing about his brother!

Question: Do you think Mr. Eisler is a Communist?

Chaplin expressed his strong views against the bomb, insisting that it was the "most horrible invention of mankind" and adding "I think it is creating so much horror and fear that we are going to grow up a bunch of neurotics."

19. David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York, 1999), 387–388.

20. See James Agee, "Films," *Nation*, 164 (May 31, 1947), 665–667; *ibid.*, June 14, 1947, pp. 723–725; *ibid.*, June 21, 1947, pp. 749–750. See also Agee's anonymous review in *Time*, 49 (May 5, 1947), 98–102. For the National Board of Review, see Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust*, appendix 8, p. 481.

21. Report, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, Aug. 10, 1948, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-32.

22. "New Chaplin Film," *Life*, 22 (April 28, 1947), 59.

Chaplin: I don't know anything about that. I don't know whether he is a Communist or not. I know he is a fine artist and a great musician and a very sympathetic friend.

Question: Would it make a difference to you if he were a Communist?

Chaplin: No, it wouldn't.²³

Here Chaplin refused to conform to the new standards governing personal relations in the McCarthy era or to the assumptions of the day. When asked if he was a communist sympathizer, he argued that the question had to be qualified. Chaplin instead sought to place the term in a more patriotic light, saying that he had sympathized with Russia's war efforts and contributions to the allied cause.²⁴

Chaplin felt he was being persecuted. "These days," he told one interrogator at the conference, "if you step off the curb with your left foot, they accuse you of being a Communist."²⁵ Chaplin was now finding the mainstream media to be among his worst enemies. Unfortunately, the public also turned on him when veterans groups and local censorship boards fought to cancel showings of the picture. For example, the Independent Theatre Owners of Ohio urged a national ban on the film "until [Chaplin] proves he is worthy of the support of American movie-goers." A censorship board in Memphis "slapped an outright ban" on *Monsieur Verdoux*.²⁶ And in some places where it was not officially banned, demonstrations by the American Legion quickly forced its withdrawal.²⁷ Whereas the film broke records in Europe, in the United States it hardly received a showing.²⁸ Despite having been set in France, *Monsieur Verdoux* was widely considered an unwelcome indictment of America.

Chaplin, however, was supported by the leftist press. The FBI documented Chaplin's reception by communist and left-wing publications, apparently considering such popularity subversion.²⁹ Al-

23. "Charlie Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux* Press Conference," 36.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 35.

26. *New York Times*, May 8, 1947, p. 31; *ibid.*, June 11, 1947, p. 33.

27. Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, 1991), 188.

28. Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 251.

29. John Noakes explains that Hoover was reluctant to have his agents review films themselves because the nature of the "evidence" was public. The Bureau could claim no authority on film analysis, and so it preferred to rely on informants within the industry. John A. Noakes, "Bankers and common men in Bedford Falls: How the FBI determined

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though *Monsieur Verdoux* expressed leftist sentiments in its criticisms of capitalist society, this hardly constituted party propaganda. As a “reliable” source told the FBI, the CPUSA had actually tried to dissuade Chaplin from making the film since its main character, a murderer, “was not a proper character to plead for peace in the world.”³⁰ Despite this knowledge, FBI officials seemed particularly piqued by Arnaud d’Usseau’s lengthy review of the film in *Mainstream*. Bureau officials expressed their consternation over *Mainstream*’s “praise of the social and political significance in Chaplin’s film.” The article proclaimed that the film effectively shows that man can be shaped to do both good and evil, depending upon the incentives of the existing social system. Furthermore, in the film’s closing scene, as Verdoux awaits execution, a priest is sent to him. Instead of repenting and praying for his soul, Verdoux tells the priest that he has made his peace with God; his quarrel is with man. According to d’Usseau, Chaplin “finishes us off with as scathing a comment on the uselessness of the church as we have ever had in American films.”³¹ Bureau analysts—not inclined to draw distinctions between communist and non-communist dissenters—unsurprisingly deemed *Monsieur Verdoux* “Soviet propaganda.”³²

It is thus not surprising that Chaplin was one of forty-three individuals in Hollywood whom the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) subpoenaed to testify in September 1947. At this point, Chaplin continued to play with fire by sending invitations to *Monsieur Verdoux* to each committee member.³³ Yet he was never called to testify. Throughout 1947, HUAC Chairman J. Parnell Thomas and Chief Counsel Robert Stripling beseeched

that *It’s a Wonderful Life* was a subversive movie,” *Film History*, 10 (1998), 313–314. As the intelligence-gathering methods of the Chaplin case show, leftist publications were also used as a substitute for direct analysis of films.

30. Report, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, Oct. 14, 1952, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-96. Chaplin made his film anyway, and sure enough, it was not shown in the Soviet Union.

31. Memo (with a clipping attached of Arnaud d’Usseau article in *Mainstream*, Summer 1947, pp. 309–312), E. H. Winterrowd to J. P. Coyne, Aug. 28, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-22. *Mainstream* was run by party members, and FBI officials apparently were irked by its growing circulation (its first issue in 1946 allegedly sold 10,000 copies).

32. Memo, Ladd to Hoover, Aug. 6, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-18.

33. In July Chaplin had responded to HUAC’s advance publicity with a telegram to Chairman J. Parnell Thomas, inviting him to view the film and asserting, “I am not a Communist. I am a peace monger.” See “Chaplin Accepts House ‘Invitation,’” *New York Times*, July 21, 1947, p. 12, and Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 260–261.

FBI officials to assist in their campaign. Hoover initially resisted but eventually approved a covert relationship. Bureau agents prepared extensive memoranda that allowed HUAC to base the selection of the so-called “Hollywood Ten” on party membership records and other information obtained through illegal break-ins and wiretaps of the communist party in Hollywood.³⁴ FBI assistance proved crucial, allowing HUAC to avoid the embarrassment of mistakenly identifying those like Chaplin who were not party members.

Yet the ceremonial function of the hearings had already been accomplished.³⁵ Hoover’s testimony before HUAC the previous spring provides insight into the roles he envisioned for different institutions in their effort to “quarantine communism,” with his FBI providing intelligence for other government agencies. According to Hoover, the “FBI does not make recommendations; it merely reports facts.” Yet these “facts” would not be communicated to the public (at least not openly or directly). While the “aims and responsibilities of the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the Federal Bureau of Investigation are the same,” Hoover claimed that their methods differed; furthermore, he “had always felt that the greatest contribution this committee could make is the public disclosure of the forces that menace America.”³⁶ Hence, HUAC made household names of folk like Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, and Ring Lardner. Chaplin, of course, did not need such “publicity.” He had already been exposed as a subversive, especially during the press conference for his own film.

But what was to follow exposure? The renowned Hollywood blacklist proved remarkably effective in ruining the careers of many talented individuals. This tactic was useless against Chaplin, for, as a part-owner of United Artists, he was simply too independent. As film commentator Bosley Crowther noted, if Chaplin had been “dependent, as most of the artists under similar ‘shadow’ are, upon the involved machinery of ‘clearance’ that other less fortunate artists must

34. Athan Theoharis, “A Lawless Agency: The FBI and the ‘Hollywood Ten,’” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 2 (1999), 415–430. See also Theoharis, *Chasing Spies: How the FBI Failed in Counterintelligence but Promoted the Politics of McCarthyism in the Cold War Years* (Chicago, 2002), 151–169.

35. Victor Navasky has described the hearings as “degradation ceremonies.” Victor Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York, 1980), 314–329.

36. “To Quarantine Communism: J. Edgar Hoover Speaks to the American People,” document 4 in Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, 1994), 114, 118.

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get, it is questionable whether he would have been able to make or appear in a picture in these times.”³⁷ Owing to his unique status, Chaplin would be able to work in Hollywood so long as he remained in the country. While not vulnerable to the blacklist, however, as a non-citizen Chaplin was vulnerable to other methods of repression. As early as February 1945, for example, Senator William Langer (Republican, North Dakota) introduced a bill directing the attorney general to investigate Chaplin for the purpose of deportation. The bill failed to pass, and Langer, in a Senate hearing two years later, wondered how “a man like Charlie Chaplin, with his communistic leanings, with his unsavory record of lawbreaking, of rape, or the debauching of American girls 16 and 17 years of age, remains [in the country].”³⁸ Not only was Chaplin’s name increasingly associated with communism, but he was also considered subversive for reasons other than and in addition to politics. Such a wide definition of subversion was useful both as propaganda in Cold War discourse and, ultimately, as a rationale for the government’s campaign to oust Chaplin from the country.

“Moral turpitude”

Significantly, Chaplin was condemned as both a moral and a political subversive. His critics latched on to facts and accusations about his sex life, blending these with his leftist views and alien status. The resulting image of Chaplin personified the basic tenets of the Cold War struggle against the twin threats of internal subversion and moral decay. In the age of McCarthyism, political subversion and moral perversion were often believed to go hand in hand. Historians of Cold War sexual politics have documented the idea that homosexuals (especially those in high offices such as the State Department) threatened national security, both because they were supposedly vulnerable to Soviet blackmail and because their very presence

37. Bosley Crowther, “Under Suspicion: The Dilemma of Charlie Chaplin and Some Other Artists in Hollywood,” *New York Times*, Sept. 28, 1952, section 2, p. 1.

38. Press clipping, *Variety*, Feb. 13, 1945, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 31-68496-A; Ma-land, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 259. William Langer, it should be noted, was no run-of-the-mill countersubversive. Indeed, he was among the few senators to resist the Internal Security Act of 1950. See: William Tanner and Robert Griffith, “Legislative Politics and ‘McCarthyism’: The Internal Security Act of 1950,” in Robert Griffith and Athan Theoharis, eds., *The Specter: Original Essays on the Cold War and the Origins of McCarthyism* (New York, 1974), 181–188.

elicited fears of contamination.³⁹ The Chaplin case shows that heterosexuals could be suspect as well, especially if they violated gender norms that were increasingly linked to the Cold War struggle. In these years, as Elaine Tyler May has argued, home was conceived as a psychological fortress against outside dangers, the central institution for combatting communism. Marriage was the only proper arena for a healthy sex life, and patriotism was expressed through middle-class, family values. Deviating from traditional family life could abet the enemy. May has asserted that, just as communism was to be contained abroad, so too was subversion to be contained at home. Interestingly, this “domestic containment” was not applied solely to political subversives (i.e., communists), but to those subverting traditional gender norms as well.⁴⁰

Chaplin crossed the moralists in some of his films, in his stance against censorship, and in his personal life.⁴¹ His wartime affair with Joan Barry proved most damaging to his reputation. Chaplin first met the twenty-two-year-old actress in 1941, and a romance soon developed. Barry’s history of mental illness quickly turned the affair into a nuisance for Chaplin (on one occasion, a hysterical Barry held Chaplin at gunpoint and threatened suicide). He tried to terminate the relationship, but Barry refused, kept showing up at his residence, and, when she became pregnant, claimed the child was his. Shut out by Chaplin, Barry decided to file a paternity suit against him. To get her side of the story out, she turned to Hollywood gos-

39. John D’Emilio, “The Homosexual Menace: The Politics of Sexuality in Cold War America,” in John D’Emilio, ed., *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York, 1993); Athan Theoharis, *J. Edgar Hoover, Sex, and Crime: An Historical Antidote* (Chicago, 1995); Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 43.

40. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, 1988), 10–15. See also Jane Sherron De Hart, “Containment at Home: Gender, Sexuality, and National Identity in Cold War America,” in Kuznick and Gilbert, eds., *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, 124–155.

41. Chaplin had long been criticized for the supposed vulgarity of his films, and reviewers often found offense in the many gags involving undergarments. Chaplin, however, devised ways of getting around the guidelines of the Hays Office, Hollywood’s self-censorship body. His opposition to what he referred to as “Presbyterian censorship” was duly noted in Bureau reports. Indeed, the charge that Chaplin hung a sign reading “Welcome Will Hays” over the men’s toilet at his studio reappears several times in his FBI file. Lynn, *Charlie Chaplin and His Times*, 131; report, Agent Hopkins, Los Angeles, to Director, Aug. 15, 1922. CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090 (serial number hard to read, but probably X1); memo, GFR, Jr. (assistant to William J. Burns), to Hoover, Aug. 28, 1922, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-X1.

sip columnists Hedda Hopper and Florabel Muir.⁴² Widespread publicity about the scandal reached federal authorities, and soon the Department of Justice opened an investigation that provided Hoover with the perfect opportunity to tarnish Chaplin's reputation further. By February 1944 Chaplin faced four federal indictments, the most serious charging that he had violated the Mann Act by paying for Barry's travel across state lines. Had he been found guilty, Chaplin would have faced stiff fines and a jail sentence of up to twenty-three years. At trial, Chaplin denied the charge, and the jury soon acquitted him, but his image was soiled.⁴³ Hopper and Muir played a key role in publicizing the scandal and also in his federal trial since they had provided evidence to the FBI.⁴⁴ Moreover, in her writings Hopper linked Chaplin's perceived political and sexual subversions, at once criticizing his second front speeches and his "moral turpitude," which she believed was "sufficient grounds for the deportation of an alien."⁴⁵ Ed Sullivan made similar connections when he charged during the Barry scandal that Chaplin was considering fleeing to Russia.⁴⁶

The *Daily Worker* may have overstated in asserting that the Barry trial was nothing but a fascist attempt at character assassination, but it is true that Chaplin's assailants used the scandal as further proof of his subversion.⁴⁷ Critic Eric Bentley recognized this when he wrote that, by the time Chaplin released *Monsieur Verdoux*, "his love

42. David Robinson, *Charlie Chaplin: Comic Genius* (New York, 1996), 88–89; Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 197–201.

43. Report, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, Feb. 25, 1944, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 31-68496-172; memo, Ladd to Hoover, Aug. 6, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-18; Lynn, *Charlie Chaplin and His Times*, 436–437. The 1910 Mann Act, also known as the "White Slave Traffic Act," was passed during the Progressive era in an effort to stamp out organized prostitution. The law made it illegal for anyone to transport a woman across state lines for sexual purposes. Although Chaplin escaped conviction under this law, he later lost the paternity suit, despite the fact that blood tests proved he was not the father; California courts did not then consider such tests admissible evidence. Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 206.

44. There is every reason to believe that communication flowed both ways. Hedda Hopper's article in December 1943 hinted that she had inside information, for she wrote that Chaplin "soon will find himself involved with something about as serious as the Barry case," which at that point involved only the paternity suit. Report, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, March 13, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-13.

45. Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 209.

46. Memo, Hoover to INS Commissioner, Oct. 2, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-24.

47. Memo, Ladd to Hoover, Aug. 6, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-18.

of women, laughed at in the twenties, had come to be linked, by the logic of the intellectual underworld, with his political leanings.”⁴⁸ Even after the federal trial ended, FBI agents continued to collect information on both the Barry case and his sex life in general.⁴⁹ In 1947 a special agent reviewed *Charlie Chaplin: King of Comedy*, Gerith von Ulm’s 1940 biography of the comedian. Dwelling heavily on the book’s description of Chaplin’s many love affairs, the agent also reported that, according to von Ulm, “rumor has it that Chaplin is unnatural in his sexual relations and it has been said that he is a homosexual.”⁵⁰ This was but one of many unsubstantiated charges found in Chaplin’s FBI file. By 1952, when Attorney General James McGranery referred to Chaplin as “an unsavory character,” it had long been well understood that Chaplin’s perceived offenses were more than just political. McGranery announced that Chaplin’s re-entry permit had been revoked because he “has been publicly charged with being a member of the Communist Party, with grave moral charges and with making statements that would indicate a leering, sneering attitude toward a country whose hospitality has enriched him.”⁵¹ The Attorney General’s use of evidence, specifically regarding the “grave moral charges,” complemented the counter-subversive strategy of rehashing the past, for he was referring to material in the FBI file regarding the Barry case, which, by 1952, had been settled for more than eight years.

“Undesirable alien”

Along with red-baiting tactics and moralistic denuncements, Chaplin also encountered xenophobia. The conviction that aliens constituted a subversive and disloyal threat was by no means new to the Cold War, as the Palmer Raids, the immigration restrictions of the 1920s, the stigmatizing of immigrants during the 1930s by politicians like Hamilton Fish and Martin Dies, and the internment of

48. Eric Bentley, “Chaplin’s Mea Culpa,” *New Republic*, 127 (Nov. 17, 1952), 31.

49. See, for example, memo, Ladd to Hoover, Aug. 6, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-18; Report, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, Oct. 14, 1952, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-96.

50. Report, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, March 13, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-13.

51. Press clipping, James P. O’Donnell, “Charlie Chaplin’s Stormy Exile,” *Saturday Evening Post*, Jan. 7, 1958, p. 96, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-184.

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Japanese Americans during World War II all make clear. Such prejudices did not abate during the McCarthy era.⁵²

Just as countersubversives linked the “pervert” with the “red,” so too did they link Chaplin’s non-citizenship with his leftist views. In his 1947 testimony before HUAC, Hoover demonstrated this aspect of the countersubversives’ ideology when he claimed that “foreign language groups” were involved in promoting communist propaganda. Sharing this assumption, James F. O’Neil, national commander of the American Legion, charged that “Communists, no matter what their pretenses, are foreign agents in a country in which they are allowed to operate.”⁵³ For men like Hoover and O’Neil, making the leap from chastising the foreign ideology to chastising the foreigner was not difficult.

Xenophobia had long characterized anti-Chaplin statements. In 1942 Hearst writer Westbrook Pegler, who had privileged access to FBI files, demanded “to know why Charlie Chaplin has been allowed to stay in the United States about 40 years without becoming a citizen.”⁵⁴ Playing on Chaplin’s friendships with German émigrés, Gerald L. K. Smith, the notorious right-wing anti-Semite, charged in 1945 that Chaplin had a special fund set aside to bring aliens into the United States.⁵⁵ What could be viewed as compassionate support for friends was given the far more insidious spin that Chaplin was plotting subversion.

Smith was not alone in criticizing Chaplin not simply for being a foreigner but also for behaving poorly as a guest. Reporters at Chaplin’s press conference for *Monsieur Verdoux* focused on the issue

52. For example, one section of the McCarran Act of 1950 prohibited the immigration of those with communist affiliations and allowed for their deportation as well. The 1952 McCarran-Walter Immigration Act gave authorities even broader powers to deal with radical non-citizens; as the pages below indicate, it was to have been invoked by the government had Chaplin sought to return to the country after his reentry permit was revoked. Fried, *Nightmare In Red*, 52, 188. See also Tanner and Griffith, “Legislative Politics and ‘McCarthyism,’” 174; William Preston, Jr., *Aliens and Radicals: Federal Suppression of Radicals, 1903–1933* (Chicago, 1963), 208–237; John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (New York, 1976), 155–167.

53. “To Quarantine Communism,” document 4, p. 188; “The Communist Menace: An American Legion View,” document 3, p. 110; both in Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism*.

54. Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 194; Kenneth O’Reilly, *Hoover and the Un-Americans: The FBI, HUAC, and the Red Menace* (Philadelphia, 1983), 80, 212–213.

55. Memo, Ladd to Hoover, Aug. 6, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-18. On Smith, see Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: the Protestant Far Right From the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia, 1983), 128–177.

of Chaplin's non-citizenship. Chaplin's most vociferous attacker at the conference, James W. Fay of the Catholic War Veterans, scolded Chaplin for his lack of interest in citizenship and his critical remarks against nationalism:

Now, Mr. Chaplin, the *Daily Worker* on October 25, 1942, reported you stated, in an address before the Artists Front to win the war, a Communist front group—"I'm not a citizen, I don't need citizenship papers, and I've never had patriotism in that sense for any country, but I'm a patriot to humanity as a whole. I'm a citizen of the world [*with heavy sarcasm*]. If the Four Freedoms mean anything after this war, we won't bother about whether we are citizens of one country or another." Mr. Chaplin, the men who secured the beachheads, the men who advanced in the face of enemy fire, and the poor fellows who were drafted like myself, and their families and buddies, resent that remark.

Befuddled, Chaplin responded by stressing his own contributions to the war effort and the fact that two of his children had served on the front lines. Yet Fay continued to criticize Chaplin's attitudes toward nationalism and American citizenship.⁵⁶ To countersubversives, Chaplin's attitude was not just inappropriate but dangerous. After all, as American Legion commander James F. O'Neil had declared, the fight against communism was very much a domestic struggle necessitating strong action by a vigilant and well-informed citizenry.⁵⁷ Nationalism was an intrinsic element of the struggle, a bulwark against the communist enemy. For his brand of internationalism, Chaplin was perceived as a threat.

Patriotic organizations like the American Legion and the Catholic War Veterans played a key role in the campaign against Chaplin. These groups envisioned themselves as essential actors in the domestic Cold War. In 1948, for example, O'Neil published "How You Can Fight Communism" in the *American Legion Magazine*. He exhorted Legionnaires to be alert and fight communism at the "community level." More telling, he described the role of the American Legion as part of a network, where "actual official investigation" was the jurisdiction of the FBI, official "exposure" was the "function

56. "Charlie Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux* Press Conference," 36. Only two reporters are identified in the transcript: James W. Fay, and James Agee of *Time* and *Nation*, who stood out as Chaplin's sole defender, asking what kind of country could consider itself free and yet pry into a person's politics and citizenship (*ibid.*, 41).

57. "The Communist Menace," document 3, in Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism*, 109-112.

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of the House Un-American Activities Committee,” and Legionnaires were to be active in “unofficial advisory committee(s),” exposing communists in all walks of life and rooting out “these Fifth Columnists in out midst.”⁵⁸

Yet patriotic groups did not restrict their actions to “local” targets. In December 1947 the New York department of the Catholic War Veterans demanded that Attorney General Tom Clark and Secretary of State George C. Marshall initiate deportation proceedings against Chaplin, whom they deemed an “undesirable alien.”⁵⁹ Three years later, the New Jersey unit of the Catholic War Veterans mobilized a protest that led WPIX, a New York television station, to cancel Chaplin shorts. Joseph Fehrenback, their commander, asserted that Chaplin was aligned with the communists, that he had not denied it (actually, he had), and that he therefore had no right to appear before the American public.⁶⁰ Interestingly, the protest had nothing to do with the content of the artist’s work, and everything to do with the character of the artist himself.

On October 12, 1952, less than a month after Attorney General James McGranery announced that Chaplin’s reentry permit had been revoked, the American Legion, which had 2.5 million members and an additional million auxiliary members, passed a resolution urging theaters to cancel showings of any Chaplin films and urging Legionnaires not to attend his movies. Chaplin, the resolution stated, “has always manifested a contemptuous attitude toward American patriotism,” and his “views of personal morality have resulted in public censure.”⁶¹ The Legion also honored McGranery with a plaque; in return, McGranery praised their anticommunist efforts, claiming that the Legion “has sounded the bell of liberty and prepared the spiritual armor needed by all who fight against the

58. *Ibid.* This cooperation had in fact been secretly institutionalized with the FBI’s American Legion Contact Program in 1940. See Athan Theoharis, “The FBI and the American Legion Contact Program, 1940–1966,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 100 (1985), 271–286.

59. “Catholics Fight Chaplin,” *New York Times*, Dec. 18, 1947, p. 38. Four Attorneys General played a role during this period: Tom C. Clark (July 1, 1945–Aug. 24, 1949); J. Howard McGrath (Aug. 24, 1949–April 7, 1952); James P. McGranery (May 27, 1952–Jan. 20, 1953); and Herbert Brownell, Jr. (Jan. 21, 1953–Nov. 8, 1957).

60. Report, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, April 5, 1951, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-73.

61. Memo, G. H. Scatterday to Alex Rosen, July 12, 1962, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-186.

godless serfs of the Soviets.”⁶² Two months later, the *American Legion Magazine* published a lengthy denouncement of Chaplin by Victor Lasky. Lasky seemed particularly piqued that Chaplin’s “deeds and words” had an “anti-American flavor.” Lasky drew up a long list of Chaplin’s supposed transgressions, including his attempts to organize an international protest of composer Hanns Eisler’s deportation, his support for Henry Wallace’s Progressive Party in 1948, and his sponsorship of the “pro-Soviet” Waldorf Peace Conference in 1949. Such acts were simply too much from someone who “has never become an American citizen.”⁶³

Yet Chaplin’s status as a filmmaker was never far from the minds of his attackers. In fact, Lasky sought to recast Chaplin’s earlier work in a subversive mold: “*Modern Times*, which satirized the capitalist machine age, showing the alleged horrors of workingmen’s lives, is one of the few non-Soviet films constantly on exhibition in the Soviet orbit.” Legionnaires were told that the tramp had been corrupting America’s screens from the very beginning. Why, after all, had policemen and millionaires always been the butts of his jokes? The answer was simple. Chaplin had long used “film as a propaganda medium.” Thus, according to Lasky, even his “seemingly in-offensive slapstick two-reelers were made with a view toward defying authority” and had been subversive all along.⁶⁴

Not surprisingly, the American Legion sought to prevent Chaplin’s latest film, *Limelight*, from reaching the public, even though this picture offered none of the social criticism of his past few films.⁶⁵ The Legion, cooperating with Hollywood anticommunists Ward Bond and Roy Brewer of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, convinced both Fox West Coast Theaters and Loew’s to cancel showings of the film. Protests and boycotts by the Legion and the Catholic War Veterans also led to early withdrawals of the film in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., New Orleans, and Columbus, Ohio. *Limelight*, which had received

62. “Chaplin Must Prove Case,” *New York Times*, Oct. 29, 1952, p. 32.

63. Victor Lasky, “Whose Little Man?” *American Legion Magazine*, Dec. 1952, pp. 28, 47–48.

64. *Ibid.*, 48.

65. In fact, Eric Bentley considered *Limelight* to be Chaplin’s “*mea culpa* It is a return to the bosom of the bourgeoisie, and it is expressed in the quintessential bourgeois form of entertainment: sentimental domestic drama.” Bentley, “Chaplin’s *Mea Culpa*,” *New Republic*, 127 (Nov. 17, 1952), 31.

many positive reviews, was expected to be a big hit for Chaplin and United Artists. Because of this pressure, its circulation was limited to about 150 theaters across the nation, whereas, according to one estimate, Chaplin's picture would normally have played in about 2,500 theaters.⁶⁶ Chaplin, unlike many of his contemporaries, never had to worry about the blacklist, but he was vulnerable nonetheless.

The image of Chaplin the subversive was constructed by a network of countersubversives that included the FBI, members of the press, and patriotic organizations. At times they actively collaborated in the process, although this was not always necessary, for the countersubversives were held together by their shared assumptions of what constituted a threat. By assailing Chaplin's political views, sex life, and alien status, they sought both to attack him as an individual and to promote a broad definition of subversion that fit in with a larger propaganda initiative in which "Americanism" was reasserted. To the countersubversive, each offense reinforced the other. In 1945 Representative John Rankin of Mississippi, after lambasting the leftist publication *New Masses*, added that he was sure the magazine "got into the home of Charles Chaplin, the perverted subject of Great Britain who has become famous for his forcible seduction of white girls."⁶⁷ Rankin's charge managed to combine all three themes into a single image of subversion, even adding a racist flourish. Yet actions against Chaplin were not limited to such rhetorical denunciations.

Booting a tramp

Ultimately, the federal government acted to banish Chaplin from his home of forty years. Since the 1920s the FBI had collected "evidence" of Chaplin's subversion. In doing so, agents packed reports (which ran to over 1,900 pages in total) with whatever derogatory information they could uncover. One striking aspect of the FBI's intelligence gathering is the extent to which it relied on the press for

66. Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 309–310. By contrast, *Limelight* was quite successful abroad. For example, as the *New Yorker* observed, in Paris Chaplin's film opened "at four of the biggest movie houses, with queues stretching half a block down the street from noon until late at night." "Letters from Paris," *New Yorker*, 28 (Nov. 15, 1952), 176.

67. Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 259. Chaplin was often mistaken for a Jew, and, for anti-Semites like Rankin, this added yet another subversive dimension to Chaplin's character.

information. Yet the relationship was a two-way street. In February 1946 FBI Assistant Director D. Milton Ladd proposed a massive public relations campaign intended to shape an anticommunist consensus. Ladd's program, enthusiastically approved by Hoover, in effect only expanded and institutionalized previous Bureau activities.⁶⁸ One example of such activity centered around the FBI's discovery of a *Pravda* article, written in 1923, which praised Chaplin as "the greatest of all movie actors" and also claimed that "he has joined the American Communists."⁶⁹ Such information would be questionable as evidence against Chaplin in a legal setting, yet Nichols believed that it "might be an excellent item for [Hollywood gossip columnist] Louella Parsons."⁷⁰ Ladd later informed Hoover that other articles about Chaplin in communist publications would be included with "the material prepared for Hedda Hopper."⁷¹ The Bureau's dissemination program effectively armed Chaplin's critics in the press, yet Hoover continued to seek a more direct attack on the comedian.

For a time, Hoover actually considered Chaplin a possible security threat, which illustrates the extent to which Hoover conflated cultural "threats" with threats to national security. After World War II began in Europe, Hoover initiated a program code-named Custodial Detention—an indexed list of persons to be rounded up in the event of an emergency. When Attorney General Francis Biddle ordered Hoover to cease the program in 1943, Hoover simply changed its name from Custodial Detention to Security Matter and

68. Since the 1930s FBI Assistant Director Louis B. Nichols's Crime Records Division (the FBI's public relations department) supervised the writing of articles, speeches, and books that appeared under Hoover's name. Under this 1946 "educational" campaign, Bureau officials purposely leaked "educational materials" to an approved network of red-baiting reporters. This countersubversive network smeared many individuals, including Chaplin.

69. Memo (with enclosure of Nicholai Lebedev, "Theatre and Music: Charlie Chaplin," *Pravda*, Jan. 12, 1923), Ladd to Hoover, Aug. 24, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-21.

70. Memo, Louis B. Nichols to Clyde Tolson, Aug. 14, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090 (serial number is difficult to read, but it is most likely 19). Louella Parsons, it should be noted, worked for the Hearst press, and William Randolph Hearst, besides disliking Chaplin for his politics, most likely also suspected Chaplin of having had an affair with Hearst's own mistress, Marion Davies. See Lynn, *Charlie Chaplin and His Times*, 293, 312.

71. Memo, Ladd to Hoover, Aug. 24, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-21.

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instructed his agents that the program was not to be “discussed with agencies or individuals outside the Bureau.”⁷²

On September 9, 1946, Hoover asked the Los Angeles office to determine whether or not a Security Index Card should be prepared on Chaplin; six months later Hoover was still demanding information. The field agents’ immediate response included the review of Gerith von Ulm’s biography that dealt largely with Chaplin’s sex life; they also listed Chaplin’s alias as “Thonstein,” citing *Who’s Who in American Jewry* as their source.⁷³ While Chaplin was not Jewish and had no alias, FBI reports continued to attribute a hidden identity to him. Although Bureau agents uncovered what were, by their standards, salacious details, to Hoover’s angry disappointment they were unable to develop any evidence that justified listing Chaplin as a security risk.⁷⁴ Only in August 1948, nearly two years after his initial request, did Hoover receive the desired answer. Hoover thereupon notified other FBI officials that a Security Index Card listing Chaplin as an Alien Communist was on file, thereby including him among individuals to be detained in the event of an emergency.⁷⁵ The Los Angeles office, moreover, now sought to “determine whether or not CHAPLIN was or is engaged in Soviet Espionage activities.”⁷⁶

72. Athan Theoharis and John Stuart Cox, *The Boss: J. Edgar Hoover and the Great American Inquisition* (New York, 1988), 199–201.

73. Letter, Hoover to SAC, Los Angeles, Sept. 9, 1946, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-9; report, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, March 13, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-13.

74. Memo, Ladd to Hoover, Aug. 24, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-21.

75. Letter, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, Aug. 26, 1948, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090 (serial number difficult to read, but probably 34); letter, Hoover to SAC, Los Angeles, Nov. 2, 1948, FBI 100-127090 (no serial number is listed here, but this letter is filed between serial numbers 40 and 41).

76. Memo, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, Sept. 3, 1948, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090 (serial number difficult to read, most likely 35). While Hoover was pressing the Los Angeles office to define the scope of the investigation, the Los Angeles office was making requests that the Bureau obtain Chaplin’s tax records in order to see what donations Chaplin made. Hoover was reluctant to make this request unless the Los Angeles office advised a security investigation. Once they did, Attorney General Tom C. Clark made the request to the Secretary of the Treasury. It is difficult to ascertain whether or not the Bureau received Chaplin’s tax records—here substantial portions of the file have been deleted or withheld. Memo, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, July 12, 1948, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-31; letter, Hoover to SAC, Los Angeles, Aug. 13, 1948, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090 (serial number difficult to read, most likely 32); letter, At-

The FBI sought to link Chaplin to Sidney Benson, the Communist Party's cultural liaison in Hollywood who, according to the file, was well acquainted with John Howard Lawson, Herbert Biberman, and others in the Hollywood Ten. Agents monitored Chaplin directly, using "technical surveillance," and in July 1949 learned of a planned meeting between Chaplin (alias Thonstein) and Benson (alias Bernstein). The sinister event would entail dinner and even "the use of Chaplin's swimming pool for [Benson] and his friends."⁷⁷ Given the quality of the reported evidence, Hoover finally concluded in 1949 that Chaplin was not a spy. Nonetheless, Hoover remained interested in whether or not Chaplin was a communist. His agents sought to uncover proof of Chaplin's connections with the CPUSA for possible use by the Justice Department in a Smith Act indictment of Chaplin.⁷⁸ In December, however, the Los Angeles office reported "no witnesses available to testify affirmatively that Chaplan [*sic*] has been member CP in past, that he is now a member or that he has contributed funds to CP." Hoover relayed this information to the Attorney General two days later, recommending against an indictment. Hoover and his associates, always protective of the Bureau's image, now feared the negative publicity that could result should the investigation be pursued. As FBI Assistant Director Ladd warned, "it was bound to reach the press as soon as the inquiry was started." In January 1950 the FBI closed its case.⁷⁹

The FBI, however, was not the only government agency interested in Chaplin. In July 1947 the Immigration and Naturalization Service contacted the FBI. Chaplin, who was considering a trip abroad, had applied for a reentry permit, and INS officials saw this as an opportunity to interview him to gather information that could

torney General Tom C. Clark to the Secretary of the Treasury, Sept. 29, 1948, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-36.

77. Report, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, July 5, 1949, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-46.

78. Passed in 1940, the Smith Act was a peacetime sedition law that prohibited advocating the overthrow of the government. It also contained a provision that authorized the deportation of aliens who belonged to organizations that advocated force and violence. Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 97-98.

79. Teletype, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, Dec. 27, 1949, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-57; letter, Hoover to Peyton Ford, Assistant to Attorney General, Dec. 29, 1949, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-57; report, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, Jan. 5, 1950, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-62; memo, Ladd to Hoover, Dec. 21, 1949, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-58.

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be used to deport him. They wanted to clear it first with Hoover so as not to interfere with the FBI's investigation. Hoover gave the INS his blessing and even sent a copy of an extensive Bureau summary report on Chaplin.⁸⁰ INS agents interrogated Chaplin and, illustrative of the cooperation between government agencies in this case, sent a copy of the lengthy interview to the FBI. They hoped to get Chaplin to perjure himself, but the government did not have any information to prove that Chaplin lied in any of his answers.⁸¹ He denied being a communist and said that he did not know whether friends like Hanns Eisler were members. When asked if he had ever donated to front organizations, he responded that he did not "carry any list of what is a Communist front and what isn't." When asked if he was a communist sympathizer, he replied, "during the war, everybody was more or less a Communist sympathizer." He was even questioned about his citizenship ("As a matter of fact, Mr. CHAPLIN, you are not a citizen of the United States, are you?"), the answer to which was obviously already known by the INS.⁸² Although Chaplin's responses negated any governmental action, he decided to cancel his travel plans shortly after, perhaps out of fear that a trip abroad could result in permanent displacement.

The INS and the FBI continued to cooperate, and their collaboration in the early 1950s had more severe consequences for Chaplin. Six months after closing the security investigation of Chaplin, in July 1950 FBI agents conducted a general interview with Louis F. Budenz, former managing editor of the *Daily Worker*. Budenz had broken with the party in 1945 and become an FBI informer. He named 400 "concealed Communists," including Chaplin.⁸³ Budenz's testimony served to reignite the FBI's interest in Chaplin, and within a year an official investigation of the comedian was re-opened. The focus of this investigation, however, was not to prove Chaplin was a spy but to assist the INS in establishing a "subversive" charge to justify his deportation.

80. Letter, Hoover to INS Commissioner, Oct. 2, 1947, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-24.

81. As the Alger Hiss case showed, prosecuting individuals for perjury was a popular McCarthyite tactic.

82. Report (including copy of INS interview on April 17, 1948), SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, July 5, 1949, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-46.

83. Memo, SAC, New York, to Hoover, July 14, 1950, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-67. Louis F. Budenz's circular definition of a concealed communist was "one who does not hold himself out as a Communist and would deny membership in the Party."

In July 1952 the INS issued Chaplin a reentry permit for his trip abroad to promote *Limelight*. In the months before his trip, INS and FBI officials communicated frequently. On September 9 Hoover met with INS officials and Attorney General James McGranery, and together they decided to revoke Chaplin's permit *after* he left the country.⁸⁴ On September 19, the day after Chaplin and his family set sail from New York City, McGranery's office announced the revocation, saying that Chaplin would have to answer INS questions about his politics and morals before he would be allowed to return.⁸⁵ Expecting Chaplin to comply, the FBI and INS embarked on a frenzied effort to build a case against him.

Initially, INS officials feared that the revocation had been an unwise decision. INS Assistant Commissioner Raymond Farrell worried that his agency did not have sufficient grounds to exclude Chaplin if he returned. INS Commissioner A. R. Mackey agreed, noting that, although they could make it difficult for him, in the end Chaplin would have to be admitted. Furthermore, Mackey "pointed out that if the INS attempted to delay Chaplin's reentry into the United States, it would involve a question of detention which might well rock INS and the Department of Justice to its foundations."⁸⁶ Having heretofore sought to use Chaplin as a symbol of subversion, these government officials now feared that their actions against him would harm rather than advance their campaign.

However, on December 24, 1952, the recently enacted McCarran-Walter Act would go into effect; this law would give the government wider grounds for exclusion—providing the opportunity to exploit the morality charge. During the FBI's earlier investigation of the Barry case, she had claimed that Chaplin had paid for two of her abortions. Based on this claim, FBI officials concluded, if Chaplin "denies the charge and INS is able to establish it, he will be committing perjury and on the basis of the charge alone, he will be mandatorily excludable under the Immigration and Nationality Act." The morality charge was viewed as offsetting "a great deal of unfavorable publicity if attempts were made to exclude Chaplin on

84. Memo, Alan H. Belmont to Ladd, Sept. 16, 1952, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-80.

85. "Chaplin is Facing Barriers to Re-entry from Abroad," *New York Times*, Sept. 20, 1952, p. 1.

86. Memo, Belmont to Ladd, Sept. 30, 1952, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-82.

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security grounds alone.” FBI Assistant Director Alan Belmont counseled that the abortion issue, if “coupled with a charge that his re-entry into the United States is prejudicial to the security of the United States,” would make Chaplin excludable “if he attempts to re-enter after December 24, 1952.”⁸⁷

Yet what if Chaplin returned before December 24? FBI and INS officials feared this scenario most, and they reasoned that it was likely, especially if Chaplin had a shrewd lawyer. Accordingly, they hoped to find hard evidence linking Chaplin to the Communist Party. Over the next few months Hoover continually pressured the Los Angeles office to come up with witnesses to testify, only to be informed time and again that most of the material against Chaplin collected by FBI agents over the years came from sources that were either no longer around or considered unreliable. In one of the more ridiculous instances, the Los Angeles office disclosed that one of its informants had gathered her information from things she overheard from a “patron at the beauty shop.”⁸⁸ Other FBI field offices were consulted, but with the same result.⁸⁹ The weakness of the Bureau’s political case against Chaplin made the abortion issue even more important. At an FBI-INS meeting in September, Assistant Commissioner Farrell, even before learning that the political issue would ultimately be useless, believed that the morality issue was the key to the case. He said the INS planned to question Chaplin’s butler and maid about Chaplin’s morality in general and specifically about the charge “that Chaplin conspired to cause one of his girl friends to abort.” Evidence suggests that when this interview took place, however, officials were so disappointed that they tried in vain to extort useful information from the Swiss butler by demanding to see his passport.⁹⁰

87. *Ibid.*

88. Memo, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, Nov. 7, 1952, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-102.

89. Memo, SAC, San Francisco, to Hoover, Oct. 21, 1952, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-93. The Los Angeles office also had information from a “reliable source” that Chaplin was not a Communist Party member, although it chose to bury this revelation in the middle of a lengthy report. Nevertheless, this informant spelled out what was likely the most accurate appraisal of Chaplin’s relation to the party: “the CP likes CHAPLIN when he comes out and takes a stand for the issues the CP thinks are correct, but they dislike the independent way in which he does it.” Report, SAC, Los Angeles, to Hoover, Oct. 14, 1952, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-96.

90. Memo, Belmont to Ladd, Sept. 30, 1952, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-82; Charlie Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (New York, 1992), 457–458.

Considering the paucity of evidence against Chaplin, it is highly likely that, had he returned, he would have been admitted. Chaplin, however, probably had more faith in his innocence than in the U.S. justice system. He had seen friends like Hanns Eisler forced out of the country. He had seen colleagues in Hollywood put in jail and forced out of work. He had seen the case against the Rosenbergs and would soon hear of the result. And so, in April 1953, Chaplin surrendered his reentry permit and issued the following statement:

It is not easy to uproot myself and my family from a country where I have lived for forty years without a feeling of sadness. But since the end of the last World War, I have been the object of lies and vicious propaganda by powerful reactionary groups who by their influence and by the aid of America's yellow press have created an unhealthy atmosphere in which liberal minded individuals can be singled out and persecuted. Under these conditions I find it virtually impossible to continue my motion picture work and I have therefore given up my residence in the United States.⁹¹

“A dirty trick”

In many ways the countersubversive attack on Chaplin succeeded. One of the most famous men in the world had had his image tarnished by a network of red-baiters that included journalists, gossip columnists, Legionnaires, and government officials. According to these groups, Chaplin was a political and moral subversive, a person who had consistently failed to subscribe to American values, proving so by never seeking U.S. citizenship. These groups had hindered his career and eventually set the conditions for his banishment. But theirs was not a complete victory. While their immediate goal was to rid the country of Chaplin, they ultimately sought something larger. Chaplin's significance was as a cultural figure who represented a very broad definition of what constituted a threat. Because Chaplin was never tried, the countersubversives did not have to “prove” their charges in an adversarial setting. Denied the publicity attendant to a trial, ironically Chaplin did not become a propaganda victory in the way Alger Hiss or the Hollywood Ten did.

Chaplin's April announcement that he would not come back eventually led to a scaling back in INS and FBI efforts to produce evidence against him. At first, FBI and INS officials' responses showed

91. “Chaplin Says He Will Not Return to U.S.,” *New York Times*, April 18, 1953, p. 34.

signs of paranoia. Hoover wrote to the Los Angeles office that Chaplin's surrendering of his permit could very well be a trick, allowing him to sneak into the country unnoticed. To protect against this possibility, the INS informed the Bureau that "appropriate look-out notices have been placed to guard against CHAPLIN's re-entry."⁹² Eventually FBI officials concluded that Chaplin was content to reside elsewhere and finally closed the security investigation in July. The FBI's file itself remained open until Chaplin's death in 1977, with the most activity occurring in years when Chaplin was considering a return visit to the United States.

In the period following the Attorney General's decision to revoke Chaplin's permit, the press debated the country's treatment of the "little tramp." Publications that applauded the government's action often leaned to the right. The conservative *Chicago Tribune* justified the revocation by pointing to Chaplin's support of "Communist-organized" peace conferences, the Joan Barry sex scandal, and the charge that he had always "scorned citizenship in this country." Not surprisingly, Chaplin's old foes celebrated the occasion. Westbrook Pegler, describing Chaplin as a "filthy character who is a menace to young girls," saluted what he believed was the "first honest show of initiative against the Red Front of Hollywood by the Department of Justice."⁹³ Hedda Hopper's farewell—"Good riddance to bad company"—was circulated by *Time*.⁹⁴ Even five years after the fact, the *Saturday Evening Post* claimed that many in America still viewed Chaplin's departure as "the most wholesome good-riddance since the day we lost Benedict Arnold."⁹⁵

Chaplin's most ardent defenders came from the left. For instance, the *Daily Worker* claimed that the ban against Chaplin was "fascist." It also lamented the protests against his film, fearing that the country was losing its devotion to good theater.⁹⁶ Yet Chaplin

92. Letter, Hoover to SAC, Los Angeles, April 30, 1953, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090 (serial number difficult to read but is between 167-169); memo, John E. Foley to V. P. Keay, April 15, 1953, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-166.

93. Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 300-301; Lynn, *Charlie Chaplin and His Times*, 489.

94. *Time*, 60 (Sept. 29, 1952), 34.

95. Press clipping, James P. O'Donnell, "Charlie Chaplin's Stormy Exile," *Saturday Evening Post*, Jan. 7, 1958, p. 95, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-184.

96. Press clipping, David Platt, *Daily Worker*, April 28, 1953, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-A. The *Daily Worker* correctly predicted trouble for *Salt of the Earth*, which soon faced ruthless opposition. See James J. Lorence, *The Suppression of Salt of the Earth: How Hollywood, Big Labor, and Politicians Blacklisted a Movie in Cold War America* (Albuquerque, 1999).

also had backers in more mainstream publications. A *New York Times* editorial, echoing the complaint of most of the government's critics, insisted that unless far more evidence were shown, the government "will not dignify itself or increase the national security if it sends him into exile."⁹⁷ The *Nation* rejected the idea that Chaplin could ever "be regarded as an overt threat to American institutions" and added that, because of his worldwide appeal, "the government cannot afford to be against Charlie Chaplin."⁹⁸ And Bosley Crowther defended both the artist and his art against charges of subversion. For Crowther, Chaplin's "little tramp," although internationally beloved, was the embodiment of Americanism, "as native and important in this land and in our great homely, popular culture as the Alger hero or Huckleberry Finn." Moreover, because Chaplin films had particular appeal among immigrant groups—"To them, the little fellow was a symbol of courage and a sort of grotesque dignity confronted with vast and alien forces which baffled and battered but never conquered him"—Crowther maintained that Chaplin contributed greatly to the process of Americanization.⁹⁹ Even the former leftist Max Eastman, who regarded Chaplin a "dupe" and a "political mushhead," felt that the Department of Justice had pulled "a dirty trick" that foolishly provided a propaganda opportunity for the Soviets by seeming "to confirm every foul lying rumor that the Communists are spreading about the disappearance of personal freedom . . . in the United States."¹⁰⁰

Internationally, Chaplin's exile was a propaganda failure. Chaplin's European tour met with a grand reception, but, because of the Attorney General's action, it also provided the opportunity for many to voice their "anti-American sentiment."¹⁰¹ From London, Graham Greene deplored the "ugly manifestations of fear" in the United States, a country apparently led by "authorities who seem to take their orders from such men as McCarthy."¹⁰² Moreover, as Eastman feared, the Soviets took full advantage of the situation. *Pravda* charged that the "action against Charlie Chaplin is eloquent proof

97. "Is 'Charlot' a Menace?" *New York Times*, Sept. 21, 1952, section 4, p. 10.

98. "Charlie Chaplin," *Nation*, 175 (Oct. 4, 1952), 287.

99. Bosley Crowther, "Under Suspicion," *New York Times*, Sept. 28, 1952, section 2, p. 1.

100. Press clipping, Max Eastman, *New York Brooklyn Eagle*, May 18, 1953, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-A.

101. "The Laugh's on Us," *Nation*, 175 (Nov. 15, 1952), 440.

102. Graham Greene, "Dear Mr. Chaplin," *New Republic*, 127 (Oct. 13, 1952), 5.

that the brown shadow of fascism is descending lower and lower over the USA.” The party newspaper also claimed that this episode was revenge against an artist whose films uncovered “the ulcers and vices of the notorious ‘American Way of Life.’” This Soviet criticism of America reached the West when the BBC gave wide circulation to *Pravda’s* coverage of the incident.¹⁰³ Moreover, the French press (communist and non-communist) denounced the American treatment of their beloved “Charlot.” Whereas the Americans gave the boot to Chaplin, Europeans bestowed high accolades. In France he was made an officer of the Legion of Honor, in Italy a grand officer of the Legion of Merit.¹⁰⁴ In short, the U.S. government was roundly criticized, at home and abroad, for its treatment of one of the world’s most beloved artists; the countersubversives did not truly win the battle over Chaplin’s image.

“The great weapon of laughter misfires”

Chaplin settled in Switzerland with his wife Oona and children, vowing never to return to the country that had made him rich, famous, and unhappy. A victim he was, but not an entirely powerless or silent one. Chaplin’s fabulous wealth immunized him from the sort of deprivations suffered by the majority of Hollywood blacklistees.¹⁰⁵ It also enabled him, if he so wished, to hit back at his tormentors. In October 1952 the *Nation* warned the INS of the dangers of getting on the wrong side of Chaplin by referring to one of his earliest films: “If Mr. McGranery has any doubts about this, he’d better recollect what happened in ‘Shoulder Arms’ [1918]: Charlie made Kaiser Wilhelm and all his generals look like a pack of fools and he’ll do the same thing to the Attorney General and his minions if they don’t watch out.”¹⁰⁶ During his first years of exile in Europe,

103. Cover page for copies of reports, Legal Attache at American Embassy in London to Hoover, Oct 31, 1952, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-101.

104. Cover page, Legal Attache at American Embassy in Paris to Hoover, Nov. 6, 1952, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-104; “Italy Decorates Chaplin,” *New York Times*, Dec. 21, 1952, p. 3.

105. On the fate that befell Hollywood’s blacklistees and émigrés, see Ceplair and Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood*; Navasky, *Naming Names*; and Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle, *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (New York, 1997).

106. “Charlie Chaplin,” *Nation*, 175 (Oct. 4, 1952), 287. Written and directed by Chaplin, *Shoulder Arms* was released on the eve of the armistice of World War I. In it, Charlie’s diminutive figure cast an ironic eye on the plight of the men in the trenches. See Roger Manvell, *Chaplin* (London, 1974), 112–114.

the embittered Chaplin made the most of his new-found freedom by fraternizing with America's "enemies." In 1954 he shared the winner's prize of the Soviet-sponsored World Peace Council with the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich and dined with China's prime minister, Chou En-lai, in the run-up to the Geneva Conference. In April 1956 he met Russia's new leaders, Nikita Khrushchev and Nikolai Bulganin, during their highly publicized visit to Britain.¹⁰⁷ Two weeks later Chaplin started production on his new film, *A King in New York*, at Shepperton Studios outside London. What would turn out to be the penultimate movie of Chaplin's career amounted to a thinly veiled retaliatory strike against his enemies in the United States.¹⁰⁸

In *A King in New York*, Chaplin stars as the peace-mongering King Shahdov of the fictional European state of Estrovia. Having been overthrown by extremists hungering for atomic weapons, Shahdov seeks, and is granted, sanctuary in the United States. The mild-mannered monarch looks forward eagerly to enjoying the New World's much-vaunted freedom and vitality, and he anticipates wide support there for his call for nuclear disarmament. What he finds instead is political hysteria and cultural vulgarity on a scale far greater than that from which he has escaped. Shahdov's shocking experience begins with his fingerprinting by customs officials—a reference presumably both to Chaplin's humiliating treatment when indicted on the Mann Act and the surveillance tactics of the FBI and INS. It soon becomes clear that no one has any time for his talk of adapting nuclear power to create a modern utopia because they are either distracted or disaffected. Soon a penniless ex-celebrity, the king is reduced to making television commercials. The only right-thinking person he meets is a ten-year-old runaway, Rupert MacAbee (played by Chaplin's son, Michael), who speaks powerfully (albeit by communist rote) of the menace of free enterprise, the crime of nuclear escalation, and the dangers posed by "too much power" to the peace and safety of the world. Rupert's school-teacher parents have been cited for contempt of Congress for refusing to name names before HUAC. Shahdov himself is then inter-

107. Manvell, *Chaplin*, 213; Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 318.

108. Chaplin's final movie, *The Countess from Hong Kong*, was made in Britain in 1966. Critics panned it as uninspired and old-fashioned, and the public stayed away, despite such box-office draws as Sophia Loren and Marlon Brando in the lead roles. See Ephraim Katz, *The Macmillan International Film Encyclopedia* (London, 1994), 244.

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rogated by the committee due to his association with Rupert, but the hearing ends with his accidental dousing of its members with a fire-hose. Humor is mixed with bitterness, however, when Rupert is shamefully forced to inform on his parents' political associates, in order to save his mother and father from jail. At the end of the film, a disgusted Shahdov boards a plane bound for the safety of Europe, although not before uttering a withering assault on a United States so bereft of its idealism.¹⁰⁹

The film without doubt struck a blow against American consumer culture, painting a picture of America's system of democratic free enterprise quite different from that promoted overseas by the Central Intelligence Agency and United States Information Agency in the 1950s.¹¹⁰ Some in the less partisan British and French trade press praised Chaplin for his boldness in focusing the cruelty and absurdity of McCarthyism on a boy and demonstrating its horrors by showing how it assailed the child's character and spirit.¹¹¹ However, the great majority of others felt deeply embarrassed by *A King in New York* and implied that whatever virtues it had were spoiled by a combination of Chaplin's sizable ego and his comic anachronisms. Penelope Houston, writing in *Sight and Sound*, noted:

The true, great satire on McCarthyism that Chaplin might have given us would not have been content with pointing out that committees can easily be made to look foolish and that people who stand in the way of a machine are likely to get hurt. There is also the state of mind, the climate in which the excrescence flourishes. Missing it, the film misses more than that: the great weapon of laughter misfires; the McCarthyist committee is drenched, but not lampooned.¹¹²

109. *A King in New York*, written, directed, and produced by Charles Chaplin, 1957. Curiously, MacAbee looks like an Irish or Scottish name, but to the ear it comes out like the ancient Jewish patriots, the Maccabees. This raises the possibility that Chaplin was commenting, through the name, either on the accusations that he was Jewish or on the fact that many of the émigrés accused of being communists or subversives during this period were Jewish.

110. On U.S. official cultural propaganda efforts overseas during this period of the Cold War, see, for example, Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London, 1999), and Scott Lucas, *Freedom's War: The US Crusade Against the Soviet Union 1945–56* (Manchester, U.K., 1999).

111. Review of *A King in New York*, by D. R., *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Oct. 1957, p. 123; "Chaplin's Good Press in Britain in Contrast to Raves in France," *Variety*, Sept. 18 1957, p. 13.

112. Penelope Houston, "A King in New York—A Review," *Sight and Sound*, 27 (Autumn 1957), 78–79.

In answer to his critics, Chaplin tried to claim that the film was meant to be anti-McCarthyite rather than anti-American, but this cut little ice with reviewers on either side of the Atlantic.¹¹³ Henry Luce's *Time*, whose view was representative of most American critics who saw the movie, pointed to the film's "shrill invective and heavy-footed propaganda," adding misleadingly that, unlike King Shaddov, Chaplin was a "self exile" who had "decided to deprive the US of one of the few authentic geniuses produced by the movies."¹¹⁴ Had *A King in New York* been made a few years earlier, it just might have shared at least some of the arresting satire of Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms* and *The Great Dictator*. It might also have compared favorably with the one American movie that openly protested the tactics of HUAC during this period, Daniel Taradash's *Storm Center*, released in 1956.¹¹⁵ But by late 1957 many Americans and Europeans felt that the United States had begun to recover its political sanity after the dark days of the early 1950s. After all, Joseph McCarthy himself had died in May that year, a spent political force since trying to take on the Army in 1954. *A King in New York* was, in short, outmoded and outdated, a commercial and political damp squib.

Conclusion

A King in New York had its world premiere in London on September 11, 1957, and immediately came to the attention of the FBI. Chaplin had left the United States a full five years earlier, yet Bureau officials continued to suspect and fear his activities. On October 1, FBI Assistant Director Alan Belmont reported that communists were exploiting *A King in New York* for propagandistic purposes. Belmont's memo circulated among several top FBI officials, including Hoover. London film critics had, according to the memo, described

113. "Mr. Chaplin's Film 'Not Anti-American,'" *The Times of London*, Sept. 28, 1957, reviews microfiche of publicity for *A King in New York*, British Film Institute Library, London.

114. *Time*, Sept. 23, 1957, p. 48, cited in Lynn, *Charlie Chaplin and His Times*, 506.

115. *Storm Center* starred Bette Davis as a librarian who is smeared as a subversive for refusing to remove a volume called *The Communist Dream* from the shelves after the local city council demands that she does so. A civil libertarian rather than a radical, she is cruelly ostracized by her community and eventually sees her beloved library burned to the ground. See Tony Shaw, "The Other Side of Hollywood's Cold War: Images of Dissent in the 1950s," in D. Holloway and J. Beck, eds., *American Visual Cultures* (New York, forthcoming).

the movie as “a satirical attack on American security procedures, including FBI ‘persecutions,’ the Rosenberg case, the House Un-American Activities Committee, and immigration regulations.” Moreover, London’s *Daily Worker* had “alleged that the film faced a boycott in Britain, because British movie distributors feared economic or political reprisals from American interests if they exhibited a film that indicts ‘witchhunting,’ defends the right of people to be communists, and laughs at many other ‘unpleasant’ facts of life in the United States.” Belmont worried that any publicity campaign by American communists for the importation of *A King in New York* could prove highly damaging to the U.S. government for three reasons. First, the State Department would be put on the spot: Whether it sought to prevent the importation of the film or took a hands-off policy, the department would be subjected to criticism that would redound to the communists’ benefit. Second, a successful campaign to import the film would provide wide, effective distribution of “the malicious communist propaganda the film contains.” Finally, an unsuccessful campaign would “provide an issue of freedom of expression around which communists could attract a sizable following with the rallying cry ‘suppression.’”¹¹⁶

In the end, the CPUSA did not run any such campaign for *A King in New York*, presumably in part because Chaplin himself did not try to distribute his picture in any systematic way in the United States.¹¹⁷ This episode, however, provides a revealing glimpse into

116. Memo, A. H. Belmont to L. V. Boardman, Oct. 1, 1957, CHARLIE CHAPLIN, FBI 100-127090-181. Chaplin had difficulty in getting the film a big-circuit release in Britain, and, unusually, he hired a relatively small organization, Archway Films, to act as distributor. But there is nothing to suggest that anything other than normal commercial considerations lay behind this, despite allegations to the contrary by the *Daily Worker*. Anthony Carthew, “Out Come the Hatchets . . . and Chaplin is the Victim Again,” *Daily Herald*, June 15, 1957, reviews microfiche for *A King in New York*, British Film Institute Library.

117. From a very early stage in production, Chaplin seems to have ruled out the possibility of getting a major American distributor for the film on political grounds. He received offers from a small number of independent distributors, but the notoriously parsimonious Chaplin was determined not to allow the film to go out in the United States for a return which, as he put it, “could only equal peanuts.” *A King in New York* would not, in fact, be released in the United States until 1973, the year after Chaplin had returned to the United States to accept a second special Academy Award for “the incalculable effect he has had on making motion pictures the art form of this century.” Harold Myers, “I have Done the US A Positive Service in Making *A King in New York*: Chaplin,” *Variety*, Sept. 18 1957, reviews microfiche for *A King in New York*, British Film Institute Library, London; Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War: The State, Propaganda and Consensus* (London, 2001), 178–180.

the collective mindset of Bureau officials in their struggle to wage a cultural cold war. The pessimistic tone of Belmont's memo was particularly noteworthy given that in January 1956, when the FBI finally terminated its overall investigation of the motion picture industry, he himself had concluded that the communist threat in Hollywood was "practically nonexistent."¹¹⁸ This new memo, therefore, indicated how easily the FBI's concern could be revived. That FBI officials would continue to fret over the potential threat of a Chaplin film long after the tramp's hold on American popular culture had diminished indicates an insecurity on their part that had in fact been present from the very beginning of the investigation of Chaplin.

This case study of Charlie Chaplin's travails in the age of McCarthyism contributes two main ideas to the literature on Red Scare America. First, it challenges a recent trend in historiography in which communists are portrayed as serious threats and anticommunists as principled warriors engaged in a righteous struggle.¹¹⁹ In fact, neither Chaplin nor the certified communists in Hollywood threatened the nation, and their assailants were anything but righteous. To the extent that some communists did truly endanger national security, Hoover's campaign against Chaplin served only to divert resources from these real threats.¹²⁰ Second, and perhaps more important, this study, unlike most works that focus on the Bureau's political activities, emphasizes the FBI's excursions into the cultural sphere. Indeed, as the Chaplin case shows, political and cultural fears converged during the Red Scare—that FBI officials actually treated Chaplin as a possible security threat illustrates this notion quite dramatically. Far from merely "collecting the facts," as Hoover often portrayed his agency's sole function, the FBI actively engaged in the process of constructing the image of a subversive Chaplin. The FBI spearheaded this effort through the dissemination of unfavorable (often unsubstantiated) material on Chaplin to red-baiting allies in the press. In all likelihood, we will never know the full extent to which the FBI engaged in a cultural Cold War; for

118. Theoharis, *Chasing Spies*, 151.

119. For instance, see John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven, Conn., 1999); Richard Gid Powers, *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism* (New York, 1995); Sam Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography* (New York, 1997).

120. This theme of diverting attention from real dangers is one of the main arguments put forward in Theoharis, *Chasing Spies*.

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instance, even sections of Chaplin's file remain redacted, and, given the many methods that FBI officials devised to keep their activities secret, it is doubtful that this complete history could be written, even if such files were available in unredacted forms.

And yet, enough evidence survives to permit comment on the countersubversive method used to wage this struggle. As Chaplin's case shows, what could be considered acceptable behavior at one moment in time (such as enthusiastic support for the Russian ally), could, when reframed in a different political environment, be manipulated into evidence of subversion. The FBI facilitated this process, serving as a clearinghouse for negative information on Chaplin. Although the new context of the Cold War rendered the charges against Chaplin more serious, it would be wrong to depict the Cold War as a completely new era in American culture. Instead, the anti-Chaplin crusade drew its strength from both the newly re-energized fears of international communism *and* from more deeply rooted moralistic, nativistic, and hyperpatriotic attitudes. Chaplin's assailants attempted to weave these fears into the single image of Chaplin the subversive. Popular culture, however, proved far less tractable than jurisprudence, for, while the splendor of Chaplin's popular image may have been diminished by the attack against him, that image itself was not transformed in the manner that Hoover and the FBI so desired.