Washington Gestapo

BY X X X

[For reasons which this article itself makes clear, its author has deemed it necessary to guard his anonymity with especial care. His identity has been revealed only to our Washington editor, I. F. Stone, who as a friend of long standing is able to vouch for his absolute reliability. The personal experience of the editors of The Nation, together with checks they have made with other government officials, fully bear out his charges. A second and final instalment will appear next week.—EDITORS THE NATION.]

I AM a minor government executive. My job is helping to run one branch of a war agency in which several thousand persons are employed. We cheerfully work long hours, swelter in the country’s worst climate, live jammed together like sardines—all this because we know that our work is vital to the war. We read the bulletins from our war fronts with a thrill of pride because we know that, though we are civilians, the army and navy rely heavily on us.

We have done a great deal to help smash the Axis—far more than we can boast about in public. And we could do a great deal more if we were not daily growing more exhausted, bitter, demoralized, and even terrorized by the unceasing warfare carried on against us. The situation has been bad for a long time. It has now become intolerable. The fascists we are helping to destroy in Europe and Asia might well wish to destroy us, but this campaign is waged right here in Washington by persons working for the government, paid out of public funds. I do not refer to Dies and Kerr and Cox and Smith—their demagoguery, though annoying enough, is worse than their bite. Far more effectively the Civil Service Commission and the FBI, by their attitude toward government workers, are undermining Washington’s strength and will to fight. Hitler could do no more.

The weapon that is causing all the mischief is the so-called “character investigation” to which all workers in war agencies are subjected. It is made once, twice, sometimes over and over again. As an investigation it is a travesty. It is little if at all concerned with a man’s character, loyalty, or sympathy for democratic ideals and forms of government. Sometimes one or two perfunctory questions are asked concerning possible sympathy for our enemies; sometimes none at all.

A man I know has kept score on the last hundred investigators who have come to his office, consuming with their inanities, vicious or otherwise, some forty-eight hours of time that he could ill spare from his war job, He tells me that only seven of the investigators showed more than a casual interest in uncovering the facts that you or I would want to know about a man’s suitability for responsible war work. (One of the seven wanted to know if the man in question was a “Nasi or a Fasi”—he made the two words rhyme and, when asked, said he wasn’t sure what a “Fasi” was.)

Before this comic and tragic investigation begins, a war worker has had to survive the thorough scrutiny of the agency which hires him. We are fussy about that and properly so. Job candidates usually have to be known to some one of us, and even then they have to run a gauntlet of many searching interviews, careful checking of references, and close questioning of friends and former employers. Then, often six months or a year after a man is hired, the FBI or the Civil Service sleuths swing into action.

Every day, and sometimes four or five times a day—because I am personally responsible for the work of three or four hundred of my associates—an investigator approaches my desk, flashes his credentials, opens a notebook, and begins a routine that is both blood-chilling and exasperating. It is a sad display of confusion, bigotry, and lack of understanding of the war we are fighting. We are engaged in a struggle to the death with the fascists. Grand juries have returned indictments for sedition and treason against many of their henchmen in this country. Yet this city alone has several thousand government investigators ransacking the town for anti-fascists and using as their textbooks and tipsheets the propaganda publications of the very men and women now awaiting trial on the most serious of charges.

The investigators who come to sit by my desk solemnly ask me such questions as the following. These are actual questions, written down as accurately as I can recall them, put to me and to people I know by Civil Service and FBI investigators.

Has Jones ever agitated for labor unions?
Does he favor the good or the bad unions?
Does he support cooperatives?
Does he mix with Negroes?
Does he seem to have too many Jewish friends?
Does his face light up when the Red Army is mentioned?
Does he support a second front?
How often does he read PCM?
Does he own pro-labor or radicalistic books?
Has he ever criticized the Dies committee?
Is he one-sided or advanced in his conversation?
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Is he always criticizing Vichy France?
Does he buy out-of-town newspapers?
Does he stay up late every night?
Does he turn first to Russian news in the paper?
Does he think the colored races are as good as the white?
Is he faithful to his wife?
Why do you suppose he has hired so many Jews?
Is it true that he reads The Nation and the New Republic?
Has he ever solicited for the Russian War Relief?
Did he ever say any other form of government is as good as ours?
Does he praise the movie "Mission to Moscow"?
Would you say he went far enough in condemning the Russian system?
Does he talk a lot against the poll tax?
Do you think he is excessive in opposing fascism or Nazism?
Did you ever hear him whistle or sing the commu-
nistic "Internationale" or other subversive songs?
Does he support the Newspaper Guild?

Questions like these are being used as a sieve to strait
anti-fascists and liberals out of the government. They serve no other purpose. You don't look for enemy agents or sympathizers among people who read PM, The Nation, the New Republic; among people who believe in the dignity and equality of all men; among people who condemn the poll tax, Vichy France, Dies, Jim Crow; among people who admire unions, cooperatives, and the heroic exploits of the Red Army.

If investigators can manage to place Jones, the government worker, in any of those categories, the next step is a curt letter from the Civil Service Commission requesting his employers to fire him because his "suitability has not been established." This curious, weasel-
worded phrase is the only indictment furnished against Jones; it usually means that he loves liberalism or hates fascism. The almost certain result is that the millions and millions of Americans who share his views and desperately need their expression in Washington will be de-
prived henceforth of his services.

What sort of people do the investigators single out as victims? Ordinary, decent people like ourselves. Let me tell you about three or four typical cases. Professor A, whose honors, distinguished career, and scholarly publications would fill a quarter-page in "Who's Who," was found "unsuitable" after six months or more of investiga-
tion by both Civil Service and the FBI. No one ques-
tioned his qualifications. No one suspected him of sympathy for our enemies; he had been denouncing them for a decade. But that was his undoing. He was under the usual suspicion of being a Communist or of sympa-
thizing with Communists apparently because a cranky neighbor had said that he had loud, boorish people, "obviously Communists," at his house and because a

labor-baiter with a criminal record and drunken habits
spun a fantastic tale of malice. The FBI and the Civil Service Commission gave Professor A no opportunity to confront his accusers and disprove their slander. Instead, they brought forth more nonsense. Professor A had given as reference another professor, even more distinguished, whose name is well and honorably known to most educated people. The FBI looked up this man in one of their favorite authorities and reported that he was said to be radical and communist. Their source-
book was "The Red Network," by Elizabeth Dilling, who was at the moment under federal indictment on charges of sedition!

Take the case of Miss B, who was accused of having had "mixed parties" at her apartment and dismissed from her job. "Mixed" was defined, under pressure, as meaning "Negroes and whites"; later this was cautiously modified to "boys and girls." Miss B was an able, competent worker. It would be hard to say which of the definitions furnished as a basis for her dismissal was the more frivolous.

Mr. C, a scientist with hard-to-replace skills, was also found "unsuitable." He would have been perfectly suit-
able, it appears, if he had not been quite so active in connection with a committee organized to sponsor a concert by Marian Anderson after she had been jin-
crowed by the D. A. R. (His fellow-sponsors included half a dozen Cabinet members, more than two score members of Congress, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, William Green, the Washington Chamber of Commerce, and an American Legion post.)

Mr. D, a writer, incurred the wrath of the Civil Serv-
ience because six years ago his agent donated an unsalable article to Fight, a magazine published by the American League Against War and Fascism. In this article D said that if the fascists of Germany and Japan were not dis-
couraged by common action of the democracies they would some day attack us. While this prophet without honor in the government was under fire, the Civil Service Commission and the FBI made no objection to the employment in a confidential post of a person who had been secretary to both the German and Finnish emb-
bassies, or of a person later arrested as an undercover propagandist for the Japanese.

Too much reading of the works of Mrs. Dilling has
given the investigators a "network" psychosis. They seem happiest when they can catch a number of people in the same flimsy spider's web. Then they have uncovered a great conspiracy and can bring about a mass purge of government workers. Investigating Jones, they discover that he knows Smith; Smith is a cousin of Brown; Brown in an unlucky moment once signed a petition calling for diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union, thus getting himself immortalized in the FBI's files. Smith, Brown, and Jones, all attend a party at which stranger Zilch, who
has had six martinis, says that the Red Army, by saving
Stalingrad, saved mankind. Jones, Brown, Smith, and
Zilch are then linked together as subversives.

Or take an actual case. An FBI agent somehow man-
aged to copy a list of telephone numbers hanging by a
government employee's telephone. The list included the
plumber, the grocer, the laundry, the corner movie house
—and the name of a man in the same office who, when
cross-checked in FBI files, turned out to be on one of
Dies's lists. A dentist was also included. A man with a
name similar to his had given money to a civil-rights
organization. A social acquaintance whose number was
given had a brother who was on the mailing list of a
cooperative organization in ill repute with the inquisitors.
This was all that was needed to piece together a whole
Washington "red network"; the list of telephone num-
bers became a "contact list" and was actually offered as
ground for firing the employee in question.

By just such a trick Stuart Chase once proved that
Martin Dies was a Communist; one could similarly prove
that the King of England is a Nazi, or that you beat your
wife. Absurd as it is, this is one of the devices of intimi-
dation here in Washington. Through its use the most
innocent of actions can be given a sinister tinge. For
example, when a rabid Southern Congressman described
the New York Times as a "Jewish Communist newspa-
paper," an FBI man, within a week, asked me whether
my acquaintance habitually read the Times.

In any proper procedure of hearings the investigators'
stupid prejudices and absurd evidence would be ruled
out—just as a policeman's notion that a man is a mut-
derer because he wears a striped suit vanishes in the fair
trial that is guaranteed to any suspect brought into court.
But the hearing afforded government workers by the
Civil Service and the FBI is devoid of any color of fair-
ess or justice. The investigators are prosecution, judge,
and jury rolled into one. The accused is denied counsel,
witnesses, and even a statement of the charges against
him. He is not allowed to face his accusers. In secluded
rooms, for all the world like Gestapo headquarters in
Berlin, he is bullied and intimidated and peppered with
questions designed to trap him. The rankest hearsay
passes for crushing evidence.

The penalty for an investigatory finding of guilt is
peremptory dismissal from the government. This means
being blacklisted for life, a denial to a citizen of his
right to serve his country in time of war, the inference—
soon known to the whole community—that he is some-
how a traitor, a seditionist, a disloyal fellow to be
shunned by decent men.

No government employee is safe from such an obscene
attack on the elemental decencies. President Roosevelt
himself could not qualify for work in a war agency. Did
he not entertain the Soviet Premier, Molotov, in the
White House? Busy as he is with questions of global
war, he perhaps does not mark the steady weeding out
from his agencies of those who could be counted on to
push rather than sabotage his war program. But if the
public allows the last liberal, the last anti-fascist, the last
friend of the workingman and the consumer to be stoned
out of Washington, or submerged until submissive in a
Potomac ducking-stool, the results will be grave indeed.

Let's Look at Labor

III. DEATH IN THE FACTORIES

BY ALICE HAMILTON

THE National Safety Council's preliminary report
on accidents in 1942 presents a startling picture
of what the intensity of war production means in
the life of the workers. Accidents, fatal or crippling,
have mounted and are still mounting. Here are a few
figures. While the death rate for automobile accidents
fell 30 per cent in 1942 as compared with 1941, that
for manufacturing establishments rose 14 per cent. In
seven states the rise was more than 25 per cent. Some
18,500 workers were killed on the job, and 1,750,000
were injured, 70,000 of them permanently. Among rail-
road employees there were 26 per cent more deaths than
in 1941, 37 per cent more accidents. Two mine explo-
sions took the lives of fifty-six and thirty-four miners;
an explosion in an ordnance plant killed fifty-four. Using our customary method of presenting disaster in
terms of dollars and cents, the report informs us that
the money loss of 1942 accidents—wages, medical ex-
spenses, overhead costs of insurance—is estimated at
$900,000,000.

What are the causes of this appalling loss of life or
of what makes life worth living—health and the ability
to work? First must be cited the great increase in the
number of persons employed; an influx of new, inex-
perienced workers inevitably increases the rate of job
accidents. Also hours are longer; there are night shifts;
many workers have the added fatigue of a long drive
to and from work. A good hot meal does more to banish