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1998

## Review of "Red Diapers: Growing Up in the Communist Left" ed. Judy Kaplan and Linn Shapiro

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### Recommended Citation

Keene, Jennifer D. "Red Diapers: Growing Up in the Communist Left, ed. Judy Kaplan and Linn Shapiro" *H-Net Reviews*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998.

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# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Judy Kaplan, Linn Shapiro, ed. *Red Diapers: Growing Up in the Communist Left*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998. 320 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06725-9.

Reviewed by Jennifer D. Keene (Department of History, University of Redlands)

Published on H-Pol (November, 1999)

Historians, students, and the general public will all enjoy the fascinating array of personal narratives Judy Kaplan and Linn Shapiro have compiled in *Red Diapers: Growing Up in the Communist Left*. Kaplan and Shapiro ask what it meant to grow up as the American children of communist activists. Individual responses to this question generated the collection of narratives compiled here.

A child's view of Marxist ideology, the close-knit radical community, and the terror engendered by the state's persecution and harassment of their parents proves riveting reading. The book eschews the temptation to classify one particular experience as "typical," though patterns nonetheless emerge as the reader goes from one engrossing story to the next. The true success of this collection is its ability to retain the integrity of individual experiences and showcase the humanity of those involved in the twentieth century Communist movement, while at the same time enabling a clearer portrait of the larger historical events and trends to emerge.

In reading *Red Diapers*, one truly enters a different world. Here, the political is personal, the "right" are the Socialists, children join the Young Pioneers instead of the Boy Scouts, and the FBI sits in an unmarked car across the street. These children grew up immersed in concern for Sacco and Vanzetti, the Scottsboro Boys, and the Rosenbergs. They spent their summers together at cooperative communist camps, were kept out of school by their parents on May Day, and learned all the songs in the little Red Song Book by heart. They lived in an integrated environment where white and black activists met, socialized, and marched together. The authors note with a touch of sadness the days of passing this radical lineage from one generation to the next appear over with the demise of a strong leftist movement in America.

The bulk of the red diaper baby stories focuses on the 1950s, but earlier and later periods also receive their due. Kaplan and Shapiro divide the anthology into three sections. The first, "Family Albums," explores the daily lives

of red diaper babies including relations with their parents, the dual lives many children led trying to "fit in" with their peers in school while spending their evenings and week-ends immersed in radical activities, and their own judgements (as adults recalling their childhood) of their parents' radical commitments. The second, "Political Trauma as Personal History," traces the effect of political persecution (arrests in the middle of the night, constant surveillance by FBI agents, going underground, fleeing the country, televised trials) on the children of Communist activists. The final section, "Claiming Our Heritage," explores how red diaper children came to terms with their political upbringing. This section reveals a generation at odds with their political heritage as a result of the state's constant harassment of their parents and their own parents' disillusionment with Communism in the wake of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956. This section tends to raise more questions than it answers, and one misses the passion and idealism so evident in earlier sections. These adult children of former Communists seem so much like us, leading respectable academic lives for the most part, and for that reason their stories are less compelling. The first two sections, however, take the reader through an mesmerizing journey of discovery into the recesses of the radical movement in America.

In "Family Albums," Sirkka Tuomi Holm explains the dual pressures felt by many red diaper babies to conform. Holm answers truthfully when a teacher asks if there are any students who do not believe in God, and no one in her public school speaks to her for the rest of the semester. Convincing her mother to transfer her to another school, Holm decides to keep quiet when another teacher asks the same question of his class. This time, however, a boy on whom she has a crush denounces her before her Young Pioneer after-school club mates by "...saying I was a coward in the face of the enemy" (p. 38). Her mother is crushed and humiliated before her fellow communists. Vowing to never be a coward again, Holm chooses the moment when a policeman is rushing towards her and her

mother as they picket with strikers outside a steel mill as the time to make her stand, stepping in front of her mother to protect her. The policeman stops dead in his tracks and turns to hit another woman. Holm feels redemption: "Although I was scared, I thought, now I can make up for not raising my hand in answer to the math teacher's question about God" (p.38). Holm's personal dilemma of the 1930s took on more sinister overtones by the 1950s when the Second Red Scare was in full swing. Now, parents taught their children to conceal their identities to protect the family from persecution under the Smith Act. As teenagers, these red diaper babies also felt extreme pressure not to get in trouble with school authorities or the local police. Even routine teenage pranks, they soon learned, would become evidence for their parent's right-wing enemies to use when charging them with undermining the moral fiber of American society. Don Amer's mother has no sympathy for a capitalistic giant like Woolworth, she tells him when he confesses to shoplifting. "But,' she said, 'think of what this would do to the important political work your father is doing if it came out publicly that his son was a thief!'" (p. 240).

The key political event for red diaper babies in the 1950s was the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. For many this event triggered their first immersion in political activism. Marching in parades, signing petitions, and writing letters developed a strong sense of connection to the Rosenbergs. Dorothy M. Zellner noted in some respects she "...cared more for them than for some people in my life" (p.85). A child's logic in deducing the personal meaning of this event appears again and again. "I wondered who was taking care of Michael and Robby...I concluded that if the Rosenbergs were in jail because they passed out leaflets, my mother, who also passed out leaflets, might be arrested, too," recalls Miriam Zahler (p. 206). "I was terrified by the executions," Stephanie Allan writes, "and frantic my parents would be killed." (p. 118). The account by one of the Rosenberg's children, Robert Meeropol, however, is strangely unmoving. Meeropol's contribution comes from a public speech. It rings with broad political pronouncements but reveals little of his personal hardships as the most famous red diaper baby of all. For this reason, his reaction to his own parents' death seems somewhat detached, in sharp contrast to the other accounts which evoke the passionate and emotional reactions of children and teenagers experiencing their first disillusionment and loss.

Two contributors, David Wellman and Miriam Zahler, use the government's surveillance of their families to their own advantage, retrieving a copy of their parent's police files under the Freedom of Information

Act to fill in the gaps apparent in a child's impressionistic and piecemeal understanding of his parents' political activities. For Wellman, the files provided a startling realization. The files focused on public meetings and events, with scant detail of their daily lives. His parents' concerns over bugs in their dining room, taps of their phones, and distrust of any stranger, proved groundless. "We were experiencing and internalizing state terror, an American version of totalitarianism," Wellman recalls of his family's fear that their every action and utterance was being recorded by unseen and unknown forces (p. 174). Rather than accusing his parents of over-reacting, Wellman concludes their reactions fit perfectly with the intentions of the Detroit Red Squad. The police became an ever-present force in their lives, Wellman asserts, because "...the Detroit Red Squad was practicing state terrorism. They were trying to put the fear of police power in the minds of the people they spied on. To a large degree it worked" (p. 174).

The painful memories of childhood encompass more than fears of betraying the family's communist convictions or nightmares the police would drag away one's parents in the middle of the night. As parents, the couples portrayed here are a mixed lot. Some are loving, caring parents but other red diaper babies express anger and jealousy over their parents' single-minded devotion to the cause of international revolution. More than a few cite their desire to win their parents' attention and love as the reason for their interest in radical causes as they entered puberty. Maxine DeFelice recounts the most disturbing story of how parental obsession with radical causes sometimes blinded parents to their children's needs. With remarkable candor, DeFelice describes coming home disheveled after being gang raped on her way from school, walking over to her mother who was conducting a meeting in the living room, only to be told "...you know better than to interrupt a meeting. Go to your bedroom" (p. 92).

Critiques emerge, not only of their parents' child rearing skills but also of some of the doctrine and authoritarian impulses in the movement. Mark Lapin contributes a wonderful short story to the collection in which he, his sister, and her friend, Simone, play Party Meetings in his sister's room. Representing the rank and file, Mark knew he had to tread carefully or risk being brought up on charges before the review committee and the expelled if he answered poorly when asked to report on the problems of the day such as the Woman Question or the Peace Question. Asked to give an update on the Negro Question he replied:

“The Negro Question’s getting a lot better,’ I said. ‘Because before they wouldn’t even let Jackie Robinson play in the majors. But now we’ve got five Negroes just on the Dodgers alone.’...‘I think we have to bring him up on charges,’ Vera said. ‘White Chauvinism if I ever heard it,’ nodded Simone. ‘Don’t you know that even if they let Negroes play a stupid game and get traded for money like slaves, they’re still lynching them in the south?’ Vera asked me. ‘Haven’t you even read your own father’s articles on the Emmett Till case?’ ‘And what about Male Chauvinism?’ said Simone, waving her ruler at me. ‘Did you ever stop to think that all your precious ballplayers are men?’ What about the plight of the colored woman?’ ‘He’s left deviationist and right opportunist both at the same time,’ said Vera. ‘Clear cause for expulsion,’ said Simone. ‘Out,’ shouted Vera, pointing to the door. ‘Most definitely and incontrovertibly and irrevocably, out!’” (p. 138).

The other revelation of *Red Diapers* concerns the strong community in which most of these children grew up. This “movement culture” reveals how being a communist meant more than embracing a Marxist critique of

capitalist culture. It also meant, in most cases, belonging to a close-knit community who debated, celebrated, educated, and organized in their social halls. It is impossible to read *Red Diapers* and not feel a certain nostalgia for the days when leftists religiously attended the Jefferson School in New York or the Labor Lyceum in Minneapolis to draw inspiration and comradeship in their efforts to build a better world.

*Red Diapers* is essential reading for all historians of twentieth century America. In addition, instructors will find this book useful in courses devoted to American political history, the history of children, or the history of radical movements. Besides the specific contextual insights offered into movement cultures and American-style state terrorism, *Red Diapers* gives instructors the ability to guide students through the process of weighing the usefulness and problems with memories as historical evidence.

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**Citation:** Jennifer D. Keene. Review of Kaplan, Judy; Shapiro, Linn, ed., *Red Diapers: Growing Up in the Communist Left*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. November, 1999.  
**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3598>

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