Citizen, Communist, Counterspy: I Led 3 Lives and Television’s Masculine Agent of History

by Michael Kackman

This article discusses the 1950s television espionage program I Led 3 Lives in the context of historical realism, Cold War anti-Communism, and domestic gender relations. Based on the real-life exploits of a Communist informer, the show treats Communist subversion as a gendered threat to state and individual authority.

In May 1949, Herbert Philbrick, an advertising executive for a Paramount Pictures theater exhibition chain in Boston, stepped out of the shadows and into the witness box to give the star testimony in a widely publicized case against eleven Communist leaders. For nine years, the nation learned through banner headlines, Philbrick had been a secret member of the Communist Party. Throughout that time, he had supplied the FBI with thousands of documents that exposed the operations of the Communist Party of America. Overnight, Herbert Philbrick became an outspoken anti-Communist and a right-wing hero. In 1952 he wrote a best-selling book that was quickly adapted into a successful television series. Both went by the title I Led 3 Lives.

Ziv Television developed I Led 3 Lives as a syndicated program, producing 117 episodes from 1953 to 1956. For over a year, the show was America’s top-rated syndicated series. Throughout its production, I Led 3 Lives remained closely tied to the figure of Herbert Philbrick, using his life as the primary source of material for its episodes. This program stands out from other McCarthy-era anti-Communist texts precisely because of its grounding in apparently “real” historical events. Like Dragnet, which similarly declared its authenticity through voice-over pronouncements at the beginning of each episode, I Led 3 Lives affirmed the legitimacy of its narrative through claims to documentary truth. But I Led 3 Lives differs from most reality-based programs in the degree to which its truth claims invoked the discursive authority of Herbert Philbrick, the “real” counterspy and author of the initial autobiography. As a paid staff member, Philbrick read and revised scripts, suggested potential plot lines, and verified the accuracy of the show’s representations of Communism and the FBI. But despite Philbrick’s involvement, the program freely adapted his experiences to fit the conventions of narrative television and the economic demands of syndicated production.

It is hardly remarkable that I Led 3 Lives might make truth claims that didn’t exactly conform to the lived experiences of those it purported to represent. But what makes this program so striking is its handling of the historiographic problem-

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atic embedded deeply within the narrative. *I Led 3 Lives* represents a moment at which the nascent TV industry capitalized on popular interest in Communism and inscribed factual reality into a popular series narrative. In doing so, television here served a historiographic function, weaving the act of writing history into the narrative structure of a program. Indeed, the program’s realism was based as much on the narrative authority of its masculine protagonist as it was on the legitimacy of the real Herbert Philbrick’s lived experiences.

Although the program drew authority from the figure of Herb Philbrick, it relied less on his involvement with the Communist Party than on his intelligibility as a traditionally masculine father. As a result, this “true” history of Communism was framed as a gendered struggle over the integrity of the home and the authority of its patriarch. In this way, the narrative structure of each episode—as well as the white nuclear family that centered that narrative—was strongly reminiscent of the suburban sitcoms that grew in popularity during the 1950s. As Nina Liebman has suggested, such family melodramas worked to contain feminine agency and reinscribe the patriarchal authority of the father.1 *I Led 3 Lives* negotiated two of the period’s most contentious sites of struggle, displacing anxieties over shifting gender norms onto Cold War global politics. Faced with the dual threats of feminine agency and Communist subversion, *I Led 3 Lives* conflated the two, feminizing Communism in relation to Philbrick’s masculine agency and constructing any expression of feminine self-determination as a threat to the American state.

What is at stake in this doubled narrative of gender norms and nationalist ideology is history. The program reminds us of this continually—in promotional materials, in testimonials by such prominent anti-Communists as J. Edgar Hoover, and within the text itself. Indeed, the Communist women of *I Led 3 Lives* challenge not only Philbrick’s masculinist nationalism but his claim to historical truth as well. Historical knowledge, this program asserts, is the rightful domain of the patriarch, and it installs its masculine protagonist as the agent of historical change.

The program’s masculinized historical narrative situates the hero’s agency in his individualism and his private home life, rather than in his institutional affiliation. Philbrick, enmeshed in the dual bureaucracies of the FBI and the American Communist Party, finds his historical voice in a turn inward, toward his sense of individuality and his identity as a family man living a private, domestic life. The key question surrounding this program is that of who was to be the privileged subject of history—that is, at this particular moment on early American television, who would be allowed to narrate a history that negotiated the dangerous minefields of both international politics and gendered family relations? This article will consider the intersection of three issues: the installation of Philbrick as the historical anchor of a decidedly ahistorical account of Communism, the feminization of Communism in relation to Philbrick’s masculinist authority, and the establishment of the home and a patriarchal vision of the private sphere as Philbrick’s center of authority and agency.

**Will the Real Herbert Philbrick Please Stand Up? Comrade Herb Tells the Historical Truth.** As the opening credits introduced each episode of *I Led 3 Lives*, a voice-over intoned:

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This is the story, the fantastically true story, of Herbert A. Philbrick, who for nine frightening years did lead three lives . . . average citizen, high level member of the Communist Party, and counterspy for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and who, for the first time, has released his secret files concerning not only his own activities, but the activities of other counter-espionage agents. For obvious reasons, actual names and places have been changed, but the story is based on fact.²

This voice-over is accompanied by a slow zoom in to the cover of Philbrick’s autobiography. Quite literally, the program begins with an assertion of authenticity—the history about to be presented is supported by a written record of truth that garnered the praise of such groups as the American Legion and the Daughters of the American Revolution. As the voice-over continues, however, television’s effacement of the “real” emerges as the announcer reminds us that “for obvious reasons, actual names and places have been changed.” Nevertheless, it is the written text’s status as an incontestable factual record—together with the implied unassailability of Philbrick’s patriotism—that provides the necessary precondition for the “fantastically true” televirtual narrative to follow.

Faced with the challenge of transforming the complex historical realities of Philbrick’s life into a weekly thirty-minute television program, I Led 3 Lives’s producers relied on hundreds of pages of notes and suggestions Philbrick submitted to them. The producers generally deferred to his expertise, particularly in matters of the wording of dialogue and accounts of FBI strategies. In a memo to the show’s writing staff, Maurice “Babe” Unger, vice president of Ziv TV, recommended: “We are insistent that all of the material which we use in these stories be on an authentic basis and double checked in this regard by Philbrick. Therefore, it is extremely important on all the scripts that we follow Philbrick’s suggestions, criticisms, etc., one-hundred percent to the letter.”³

Just as the opening credits of I Led 3 Lives declared its truthfulness, the show’s promotion materials, which targeted both audiences and potential sponsors, declared its status as historical truth:

I Led 3 Lives: Tense because it’s Factual! Gripping because it’s Real! Frightening because it’s True! . . . Not just a scriptwriter’s fantasy—but the authentic story of the Commie’s attempt to overthrow our government! You’ll thrill to the actual on-the-scene photography . . . factual from the records dialogue. . . . Authentic sets and scripts personally supervised by Herbert Philbrick, the man who for nine agonizing years lived in constant danger as a supposed Communist who reported daily to the FBI! Never before has such a dramatic document appeared on TV!⁴

I Led 3 Lives’s claims to historical realism were a means of differentiating it from other intrigue shows, but perhaps more important was its anti-Communist “public service” function.⁵ Indeed, I Led 3 Lives won praise as a valuable source of historical knowledge. In 1955 Admiral Arthur Radford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, presented the Freedom Foundation Top Award to the show’s producers.⁶ It also won the blessing of Reverend Edwin R. Broderick, director of the Radio and Television Communications Office of the Archdiocese of New York, who felt the program would “promote a stimulating, enthusiastic, and sympathetic public reac-

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tion, and, therefore, be of inestimable value to all who believe in and hope for the continuance of our American way of life. I wholeheartedly recommend it and feel it will do credit to any organization under whose sponsorship it appears.”

The program was even used as a U.S. Army training film, and on at least one occasion producers helped change the show’s scheduling so that the soldiers on a nearby military base could view it at a convenient time.

In keeping with their strategy of positioning *I Led 3 Lites* as verifiably “real,” Ziv producers also emphasized the program’s documentary-style location shooting. The show’s “actual on-the-scene photography” cultivated a realist aesthetic, but it also kept production costs low. As Jon Epstein, a senior writer for the series, explained, “We shot the hell out of Hollywood. . . . Ziv did it because it was cheaper to shoot Hollywood and Vine than it was to try and build a set of something.” The producers also saved money and reinforced the show’s realism by choosing not to use makeup. According to Epstein, “The reason for that, they said, was ‘well this is very documentary and we want to keep it documentary in style.’ But I tell you . . . one of the things they were trying to do was to save the cost of a makeup man every week. . . . They rationalized these things to the point where they believed it themselves.” Rationalized or not, these production techniques were hailed in advertisements and press materials to further substantiate the program’s claims to truth.

These cost-cutting strategies were symptomatic of the pressure to condense complex historical material into a form that would be profitable in a growing television industry. Ziv TV, a low-budget syndicator, produced *I Led 3 Lives* for roughly $18,000 per episode, only 10 percent of the cost of a typical network filmed series, and often two or three episodes were shot in a single week. Thus, the program’s documentary production style, which involved generic exterior locations filmed with available light and a minimal crew, was motivated more by economics than by an impulse to reproduce the minutiae of Philbrick’s life.

The frugal budgets that motivated the “documentary” aesthetic of *I Led 3 Lives* undercut the specificity of the program’s references to Philbrick’s lived experiences. Although the show was shot in Los Angeles, Philbrick had actually lived in Boston, and his autobiography carefully details a variety of places in the city where he interacted with Communists and the FBI. None of Philbrick’s recommendations about locations made it into the program. Similarly, while Philbrick envisioned *I Led 3 Lites* as a period piece situated in the political climate of World War II, the show was stripped of that context. This lack of historical specificity was emblematic of the program’s adaptation of Philbrick’s experiences in general—the contradictory combination of historically grounded authority in a relatively ahistorical setting complicated the program’s claims to historical truth.

*I Led 3 Lites* thus represents a historiographic contradiction, one in which the authenticity of its central figure is selectively invoked to legitimize a dehistoricized ideological statement. Because of the economics of production and the limitations of serial television, “fact” alone cannot authenticate the program’s truth claims. Instead, the program invokes the conventions of dramatic narrative to complete that task. Indeed, the credibility of the real Philbrick can scarcely be distinguished from the narrative authority of the program’s protagonist. *I Led 3 Lites* might thus be
read as what Hayden White terms a “historical metafiction,” in which “everything is presented as if it were of the same ontological order, both real and imaginary—realistically imaginary or imaginarily real, with the result that the referential function of the images of events is etiolated.”13 In other words, references to the real Philbrick give credence to the program’s representations, but it is the principles of televisional narrative that ultimately affirm the truth status of the program’s “historical reality.” The historical metafiction of I Led 3 Lives is produced by conflating the real Philbrick with the narrative authority of his representation.

It is Philbrick’s cultural intelligibility as an individualized masculine hero that solidifies the program’s status as historical drama. That is, Philbrick’s authority as the narrative’s protagonist endows him with his subjectivity as a producer of historical knowledge. This codependence between “real” and narrative authority is the potential frailty of I Led 3 Lives’s historicity, because any challenges to the protagonist within the narrative simultaneously challenge the historical agency of the real Philbrick. The site of struggle over the writing of history, then, is the gendered authority of the narrative’s protagonist. For this historical metafiction to unfold on the television screen, Philbrick’s encounters with America’s ultimate ideological “other” are thus represented as a series of gendered struggles in which he must overcome a range of monstrous Communist women and feminized Communist men in order to protect the integrity of the American family and state.

Iron-Gray Disciplinarians and Ruby Red Vixens: I Led 3 Lives and the Bureaucratized Female. At least half of I Led 3 Lives’s 117 episodes feature powerful Communist women, most of whom command a clan of ineffective, subservient male comrades. Few episodes feature even a single female FBI agent. The program thus pits two dramatically different bureaucracies against each other, with Comrade Herb as the intermediary between them. On the side of American virtue is the men’s club of the FBI, an efficient organization of terse agents who work quietly but thoroughly, doing battle with the organization’s evil twin, the Communist Party—a perversion of state power staffed by ineffectual men and overly aggressive women.

The Communist women of I Led 3 Lives are typically portrayed as mechanistic drones. Philbrick described Comrade Alice, for example, as a “squat, stocky, square-jawed functionary, a plain proletarian, and like most Party women she gave an impression of drab grayness, almost the uniform of Communist femininity. She was bossy, and could tell men what to do as well as she could tell her own sex.”14 Alice, like many of the program’s Communist women, is emotionless, authoritarian, and desexualized. As Joan Hawkins has recently observed in her analysis of the Cold War propaganda film Red Nightmare, the lasting impact of Communism in such narratives is to disrupt essentialist categories of gender, substituting instead female characters who defy normative gender roles but who are depicted as incomplete and often unstable.15 Often, the female comrades of I Led 3 Lives are clearly not American, distinguished instead by vaguely Eastern European or East German accents. Often wearing severely cut suits, their typically rigid postures mirror the brusqueness of their voices. As one female comrade growled at Herb,
“Hmmmph! You are not to ask so many questions! It is not for the good of the Party!” Communists like Alice are threatening because, in their mechanistic pragmatism, they represent a female co-optation and manipulation of state power.

The program contrasts its hard-line Communist women with a cast of docile, and therefore virtuous, American women. As Philbrick noted in his comments on a script, “Here again, be sure not to paint Comrade Mary as too soft a type. Anybody working at Communist Party headquarters, especially today, knows exactly what the score is. She would not be a person such as you would find working at Republican or even Socialist Party headquarters.”

Here, a key distinction is made between loyal American women who know their place and those who are overzealous in their attempts to assume political power. These women comrades disregard traditional American centers of patriarchal authority, are vicious and cold-blooded in their dedication to their cause, and let no man stand in their way.

In fact, it is Communist men who are most likely to be undisciplined “deviationists”—those who are reluctant to follow the Party line to the letter and who might fail to carry out their assigned missions. An episode entitled “Historical Society,” for example, features a Communist woman named Jameka who runs an underground printing press. Jameka is positioned as falsifying the dominant histories of America’s founding fathers, so that the program’s feminization of Communism merges with its principal concern over the writing of history. Jameka never trusts the men who work for her, and with good reason—her obsequious male assistants ultimately fail to detect Philbrick’s sabotage of a major printing project. Jameka sends Herb out to spread damaging information about Thomas Jefferson to a random mother and child walking down the street, but she decides to accompany Herb because she doesn’t trust him to complete the assignment effectively. It is Jameka who ultimately tells little Joey and his mother about how Jefferson once stole $1,000.

Later, Jameka informs Herb that the rewriting of history is a key tactic of Communist subversion. In the clipped and awkward speech typical of the program’s Communist women, she advises, “By mixing up known fact with statements we want the public to accept as true, in most cases it works very well. Basic psychology.”

But there is more mixing up going on here than just a series of details about a late American president’s life. Jameka has seized from Philbrick the power to narrate history, and she can’t trust male comrades to carry out that important task. Jameka’s historical account is feminized by both her gender and her Communist sources, and the program positions it as unreliable and dishonest. Moreover, the historical knowledge Jameka produces is judged inferior because it blurs fact and fiction (despite the irony that such a blurring is fundamental to the program’s own strategy of forming historical truths). Jameka’s challenge to conventional American history is intertwined with her challenge to the narrative authority of Philbrick as protagonist. Indeed, Philbrick stands meekly by, mute, while Jameka takes charge of the situation. In such instances, Philbrick is unable to act, and it is only later under cover of night that he is able to counterattack. In I Led 3 Lives, to gain narrative authority is to gain historical authority, and Philbrick’s efforts to control historical knowledge are figured as a gendered struggle to suppress the narrative agency of Communist women.
Although some of the show’s Communist women are intellectual pragmatists, others are highly sexualized, providing yet another means of dislocating Philbrick’s narrative authority. In addition to a host of dour schoolmarm who might easily double as bodyguards, I Led 3 Lives also features what producers referred to as “beautiful Mata Hari–type commie agents.” This Communist woman is threatening precisely because she turns her sexual power to sinister ends. Severe and humorless, the “beautiful Mata Hari–type commie agent” is positioned as unnaturally in the extreme, because she uses her beauty toward explicitly political ends. As Hawkins might suggest, the sexualized Communist agent is contrasted with women like Herb Philbrick’s wife, Eva, whose subservience to normative gender roles is positioned in the narrative as an expression of her essential nature.

Still, the beauty of the show’s Communist dominatrixes was alluring even to American patriots, and therein lay these women’s dangerous power. The mysterious sexuality of the impassioned Communist intrigued even the married Philbrick. A passage from his autobiography captures this intrigue: “The alarming demonstration of Party fervor put on by this attractive young girl lapsed into an impromptu quotation from Stalin which carried her to even greater heights of ardor. . . . To hear her speak with such vehemence unnerved me to the extent that when I reached home that night, I could not sleep.” Philbrick makes sense of this woman by sexualizing her, and he can only understand her forceful politics as an expression of “ardor.” Indeed, what kept Herb “awake at night” was the tension between his fascination with and repulsion of Communist women’s sexual and political agency. Like the women of the television series, the portrait sketched by this passage is one of a woman whose fervor and ardor are intensely seductive but whose sexuality is incoherent, troubled, and out of place. The mixture of elusive female sexuality and political power is simply too much for the troubled Herb to bear.

In an episode called “Deportation,” Comrade Elena is an attractive Eastern European diplomat suspected of carrying damaging reports about American Communists. Mistrustful of even their own agents, Party officials send Herb to investigate her. Herb tails Elena into a lingerie boutique, and he mutters in voice-over, “Subject examined—purchased several pairs of stockings. Wears small size, has nice legs. Nothing here to interest Comrade Joe Garth. Or is there? Elena detects Herb and eventually asks him to take her to a football game so she can learn about American culture. She then invites him to her apartment, and he has no choice but to follow, since he has been given strict orders not to lose sight of her. In the elevator, Herb reflects, “The things a man has to put up with leading a triple life! The things that can happen to a nice domesticated counterspy with a pretty wife and five small kids!” But once they reach her apartment, Elena ditches him and sneaks out the back door. This Communist’s enigmatic sexual power is literalized when Elena slips away from Philbrick and remains uncontained.

Elena’s power as a “girl diplomat” and a “beautiful Iron Curtain consular official” is manipulative and sexual. When Philbrick meets FBI special agent Dressler at the airport just before Elena is to be deported, he informs the agent that the Communists had been surveilling her as well:
DRESSLER: What's up? The comrades want to keep her around to run for Miss America?

HERB: Could be.

DRESSLER: She's just the girl who could do it, too. She played footsie with the Nazi bigwigs during the war, then she pulled a switch after the war and married a famous diplomat. And after his so-called suicide, she pulled another switch, now she's the comrades' number one pinup girl!

After Elena is searched by an FBI "matron," Elena taunts the male agents, "Are you convinced I'm not carrying an atomic weapon?" As far as the agents are concerned, she might as well be.

As it turns out, Elena has been concealing a valuable piece of microfilm. The microfilm—simultaneously historical artifact and source of counterespionage knowledge—is secretly stashed in her lipstick case, the symbol of her sexual potency and seductive danger. In this scene, the threat of international espionage and the threat of the overly sexual woman are conflated—symbolically merged and embodied in the female spy's cosmetics. As Elaine Tyler May has argued, this combination of discourses on sexual, ideological, and nuclear containment conflates feminine sexuality with nationalist politics. She writes, "Subversives at home, Russian aggressors abroad, atomic energy, sexuality, the bomb, and the 'bombshell' all had to be 'harnessed for peace.'" In the case of Comrade Elena, each of these discourses is articulated through the body of the sexualized Communist woman—although her power cannot be fully harnessed or contained. As a result, Elena must be expelled from the country after an FBI agent covertly copies the information lodged in her lipstick case.

The bureaucratized Communist women of I Led 3 Lives might be best read as a displacement of anxieties about the state of masculinity in the face of bureaucratized power in general. I Led 3 Lives paints women as technocratic social engineers. Philbrick, however, is just as fully implicated in a bureaucratic system. Philbrick's anti-Communist practices rarely involve direct action. Instead, his primary task is to relay information to the FBI. Philbrick is an intermediary between two bureaucratic systems beyond his control—the Communist Party, staffed by mannish or oversexed women who issue abrupt commands and send Philbrick on errands, and the FBI, which refuses to give Philbrick any information about the cases he's working on and instead passes his knowledge on to those who can act on it. In fact, it is often difficult to determine just what it is that Philbrick does to fight Communism. Countless episodes show Herb delivering precious microfilm or paper documents to the FBI for quick copying, but we (like Philbrick) seldom learn what secrets the documents reveal. As Philbrick himself asserts, knowledge is his most effective weapon, but even that weapon often eludes him. In his struggle to assert masculine authority, Philbrick is ill equipped to fight that which he does not know—the specter of feminized Communist power.

Philbrick is faced with a troubling condition—the only source of power for him is to turn to the FBI, but this bureaucracy constantly strips him of his agency and sense of effectuality. He is faced with the difficulty, to borrow from William Whyte's Organization Man, of asserting his "individualism within organization"
life.” In his continual deferral of authority to the FBI (the real, and invisible, “agent” of this narrative), Herb must learn to become an effective “organization man” and learn to, in Whyte’s words, “love Big Brother.”22 In I Led 3 Lites, however, Big Brother is not terribly different from Big Sister—the feminized Communist Party. The FBI is constructed as a benign, if constricting, social force, whereas the Communist Party threatens to undo, with violence if necessary, the stability of gendered power relations. The two are linked, though, in how each strips the masculine protagonist of his individual agency. Consequently, it is to the home that Herb ultimately retreats—to the family that depends upon his leadership, and to the secret office and darkroom where he can produce his own knowledge of his experiences. In his struggle to act as agent of his own historical narrative, Philbrick must retreat to a place of refuge in the private sphere where he can escape the prying eyes of the FBI and the Communist Party.

**Communism and the American Family Ideal.** In one of many episodes in which Herb’s cover is nearly blown, he rushes home to prepare yet another of his FBI reports. As he scurries down a side street looking over his shoulder, he says to himself in voice-over:

> Home, Philbrick, a man’s castle. When an enemy attacks your castle, you fight—you fight with any weapon you can lay your hands on—this is your home, Philbrick, and you fight. Get to your weapon—your secret weapon. Sally said they know everything about you. Here’s one thing they don’t know about. A secret room in the attic of your own home. This is it, Philbrick—now your finger is on the trigger. Your weapon is information—get that report typed up now. This is your weapon, Philbrick—information.23

The home is important for two reasons: it is the local battlefield on which the global ideological struggles of Communism and democracy are staged, and it is the only place in which the “organization man” can fully exercise his agency. But because the home is such a politically charged environment in this era of social containment, Philbrick and his family are constantly at risk there as well. Philbrick’s home is a
In his autobiography, Philbrick describes the secret room that became his private refuge: "The little square room [in the attic] was a household sanctuary to which I could escape. But the secret room was also a prison to which I was sentenced for long dark hours on many nights after Communist meetings."24 Herb, like other middle-class fathers of the 1950s, retreats to the suburban fortress of his home.25 But even there, Philbrick must enclose himself in a secret room so that he can engage in the practice of writing history. Hidden from Communists, FBI, and family alike, Philbrick enters this windowless chamber through a secret door in the back of a storage closet. This place of refuge is rarely featured in the television program's narrative, but it appears in the closing credits of many episodes. As the music swells, Philbrick sits hunched over his typewriter in a dark and musty attic, giving closure to the events that have just taken place. Philbrick's narrative and historical agency merge in this diegetic space that bridges the gap between the fictional Philbrick and his "real" counterpart—as we hear Philbrick's voice-over explaining the episode's final resolution, he invites us back again next time to witness the true experiences of the man who "really did lead three lives."

Paralleling the prominence of the home in I Led 3 Lives is the show's constant assertion that the real Philbrick (as well as his fictional equivalent) is just another everyday family man with an upstanding social background. In his notes for the pilot episode, Philbrick imagines an FBI agent describing him as "clean as a whistle. [He] comes from a good family background, has an excellent reputation in his church and in his business, and has a long record of legitimate youth activity and work."26 Here, Philbrick bolsters his credibility through the strength of his family ties. Further, he often claimed that the one thing that enabled him to withstand nine years of Communist indoctrination was his "good family."27 The television program reinforced the importance of Philbrick's family life, and it is Philbrick's position as his family's provider and protector that invests him with the power to
produce credible historical knowledge within a televisual narrative centered around
the nuclear family.

Some of the most memorable episodes of I Led 3 Lives are those that bring
the threat of feminized Communist power into the Philbricks’ home. One epi-
sode, which begins in Berlin, features Comrade Marta, another East German Mata
Hari, as she interrogates a young Communist man about his failure to recover a
critical dossier:

MARTA: You’re still an American. A turncoat GI. I don’t believe you. . . . Let’s see you
prove it.
RUDY: I can’t prove anything, Comrade Marta, but I give you my word. As the man
that brought you into the Party. As your friend.
MARTA: My friend!? You have the nerve to resort to such bourgeois sentiment? That
proves it! You’re nothing but a capitalist traitor!
RUDY: (Getting more agitated, he’s fighting for his life) No . . .
MARTA: I’ve heard enough!
RUDY: Please! It’s like I told you. It was impossible to cross the border. I’ll get the
envelope for you, and I’ll bring it back. I promise I’ll bring it back . . . I’ll bring it ba . . .

In a burst of aggression that a TV mom like June Cleaver or Harriet Nelson might
only dream of, Comrade Marta cuts short Rudy’s pleas with a blast from her Luger,
and he crumples to the floor, dead. When Philbrick enters the room, she looks him
over with contempt: “You hope that we have no assignment for you. You would
prefer to go home to your American family, to your wife. That is more important to
you than Party loyalty, isn’t it?” Herb protests, but as proof of her seriousness
Marta orders his return to America to show the other comrades the spent shell
casing from the bullet that killed Rudy. Little does Herb know that Comrade Marta
will soon bring her distinctive negotiation style directly into his own living room.

Back in the States, Herb’s wife, Eva, is sewing a button on Herb’s jacket, a
gesture he clearly appreciates: “Thanks, honey. You don’t know how good it is to
have a wife who sews buttons on instead of shooting them off—meaning Comrade
Marta!” Later, when Marta arrives in the United States for a visit, the Party orders
Philbrick and his wife to house her. After the two women meet at the Philbricks’
home, Eva sits in the living room painting her fingernails. The armed and danger-
ous Communist operative gleams at Herb’s wife and snaps, “I find the charm you
American women affect rather sickening. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were
jealous. If I didn’t know you were a loyal Party member, I’d say you were afraid of
me!” After watching this exchange with dismay, Philbrick insists to himself, “You’re
not gonna let a girl with a little pistol try and stop you.” Indeed, after ridding his
family and the Western world of Comrade Marta, he ruminates, “I wonder if Eva
would like to go out for dinner tonight.” With a smile, Philbrick returns home to
his wife, where his relief in surviving Marta’s invasive presence is equaled only by
his contentment in his wife’s docility.

In an episode called “Child Commie,” Communism infiltrates the home in
the guise of a seemingly innocent ten-year-old girl. Beth, the young daughter of a
leading Communist official, comes to stay with Herb and his family for a few days.

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Little does Herb know, however, that Beth is a Party spy who intends to expose his disloyalty: “I don’t think you really care about your Party work,” she tells a meek-faced Philbrick. “I don’t think you really care about Communism. There’s something funny about the way you act—something funny and dangerous. And by the time my father gets back, I’m going to know what it is!” Like the Communist publisher Jameka, Beth is something of a revisionist historian. She tells Herb’s daughter that the American founding fathers were hypocritical cowards, and she steals some documents from the glove compartment of Herb’s car that she believes will expose his counterspy activities. Philbrick eventually tricks Beth and covers his tracks, but not before she gives him a significant scare.

When she invades the Philbricks’ home, Beth very nearly disrupts Herb’s practice of gathering and analyzing information that can be turned against the Party. In fact, he admits to his wife that while that “junior Commissar” is in the house, he cannot risk entering the secret room where he usually prepares his reports. If the home is lost in the battle with Communism, the program seems to suggest, the counterspy will no longer have a place of refuge from which to mount his struggles. Far from being an innocent child, Beth threatens Herb’s agency as a historian and substitutes instead her own version of American history.

By the end of the episode, little Commie Beth has inspired more pity and contempt than fear. And it is Herb’s young daughter Connie who delivers the moral lesson that closes the episode, ironically voicing the anxieties of a paranoid American masculine subject:

CONNIE: I just had to make sure that everything Beth Dickson told me was lies—and they sure were. . . . I didn’t like her very well. I feel sorry for her.
HERB: Sorry?
CONNIE: Yes. I don’t know why, but it seemed to me even though she was smiling all the time, she didn’t really mean it. It seemed to me she was a sad little girl. Don’t you feel sorry for her?
HERB: Yes, darling, now that you mention it, I do feel sorry for her.

In this scene, Herb’s daughter reiterates what the episode tells us all along—that Communism has the potential to turn otherwise charming little girls into stern disciplinarians immune to what Tyler May has called “the cult of domesticity.” In other words, Beth fails to embrace the moral and civic virtue of domestic containment. Further, this girl’s youthfulness makes her more threatening, for she signals the emergence of an entire generation of rebellious Communist women.

According to the program, one of the most egregious effects of Communism’s permeation of domestic boundaries was that it replaced family loyalty with Party loyalty. As Philbrick insisted, “It is quite difficult for any person to move very deeply into the Party unless the Comrades are certain that the husband or wife can be trusted. However, despite this ‘trust,’ the Communist Party still does not trust anyone; therefore it is the duty of even married couples to distrust each other. . . . Wives will turn in husbands, husbands will turn in wives, and children will betray their own parents.”28 In the program’s idealized domestic family, Herb’s wife and five daughters never question his authority. In families “polluted” by Communism, however,
women regularly contest the masculine authority of their husbands and fathers. Indeed, any feminine expression of discontent with masculine domestic authority is constructed as a Communist subversion.

*I Led 3 Lives* is rife with families split asunder by Communism, and particularly by the fervent sentiments of wives and daughters. Permissive parenting, the program suggests, can lead to disastrous results. In an episode entitled “The Old Man,” a Communist woman turns on her enfeebled father, insisting that he sacrifice himself for the cause:

SARAH: The duty of every Communist is to be sacrificed in case of need!
HOLMAN: But, Sarah! You’re my daughter! I brought you up to be loyal to the Party, yes, but is there to be no loyalty, no feeling between us?
SARAH: The Party comes first, before any personal consideration!

The show suggests that no one, not even a woman’s own father, can trust a Communist woman. Communism is constructed as an infectious force that shatters the bonds of family, weakening fathers and empowering women to seize cruel control of those around them. Sloppy parenting, the program suggests, leads to improperly socialized women who fail to embrace their own containment and who will eventually turn against their fathers.

*I Led 3 Lives*, like many of the suburban sitcoms with which it shared the television dial, strategically emphasized the sanctity and moral fortitude of the middle-class nuclear family. Such programs, Nina Liebman has argued, were characterized by an “omnipotence placed upon the family unit as site of both problem and solution” and “by an emphasis upon the father as the validation for a successful narrative resolution.”30 Like programs such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*, *I Led 3 Lives* presented “idealized versions of family life, often pitted against outsider, dysfunctional units.”30 But what distinguished *I Led 3 Lives* from other programs of the period was the heightened degree to which Philbrick’s family and home were threatened. Indeed, if *Father Knows Best* was an assertion of the sanctity of white American suburban life, *I Led 3 Lives* exposes just how tension-filled and anxious that construction is.

Like the Nixon-Khrushchev “kitchen debate” that displaced ideological conflict onto a discussion of the relative merits of American and Soviet washing machines and stoves, the terrain of ideological struggle in *I Led 3 Lives* is ultimately that of the idealized nuclear family. Building on the authority of Herbert Philbrick’s lived experiences, *I Led 3 Lives* constructs its historical narrative of Communism around a suburban family preserved by Philbrick’s paternal authority. This precious preserve is the source of Philbrick’s agency, but it is also the point at which that agency might be ruptured. The family is the site at which the program’s most heated skirmishes with Communism take place, and its patriarch must invoke the full resources of the FBI, the most powerful law enforcement agency in the world, to maintain its integrity.

**Postscript: Herbert Philbrick and the Shattered Family.** The 1952 edition of Philbrick’s book began with the following dedication: “To Eva, my wife: who
proved that a woman can keep a secret. “31 In the pages that followed, as in the television program, Herb’s family was celebrated as the source of strength that carried him through countless long nights as a counterspy. Philbrick, the man of “good New England stock,” was supported tirelessly by his wife and daughters, and he led us to believe that it was ultimately for them that he acted. But not long after that first edition of I Led 3 Lives was released, Herb and Eva were divorced. A revised edition of Philbrick’s autobiography was released in 1972, and in that version all references to Eva and his daughters were purged. Philbrick’s family—the linchpin of his historical agency in both the original book and the television series—was completely eliminated. The reader of the second edition might easily assume that Philbrick was single.

This peculiar twist has more than casual anecdotal significance. It is worth noting, not to point out the cruel ironies of history but to bring into bold relief the dependence of the first edition of the book, and especially of the program, on the organizing logic of Philbrick’s family life. Were it not for the salient presence of the family in the tale of Philbrick’s life, his story might never have had the cultural resonance it did. One is reminded of the cautionary tale of Matt Cvetik, another Communist-turned-informer from the early years of the Cold War. Cvetik’s autobiography was the inspiration for the Ziv radio show I Was a Communist for the FBI, and had he not sold the picture rights to his story to Warner Bros., Cvetik might easily have become the protagonist of a Ziv television series as well. But other factors also help explain why Philbrick, and not Cvetik, became the three-lived hero. Cvetik was divorced by his wife and disowned by most of his family for his involvement in the Communist Party, and he was largely unable to recuperate his public image. Instead, he died penniless, discredited, and alone. While Cvetik never escaped the stigma of the untrustworthy informer, Philbrick was able to emerge as a heroic patriot by constructing himself as a dedicated father and family man. Ziv producers then capitalized on the figure of Philbrick as a culturally sanctioned source of historical knowledge and, equally important, a narrative anchor around which to build an episodic televisual history of Communism.

Finally, this anecdote points up the disjuncture between the televisual representation of Philbrick’s family and the actual lived conditions they and other American families faced. This disjuncture reveals once again how aggressively the program worked to inscribe Philbrick’s complicated experiences into an episodic narrative of family life, but it also speaks volumes about the gulf between 1950s television families and the audiences that watched them. Indeed, a growing body of scholarship has suggested that the rigidly inscribed gender norms common in 1950s popular culture texts were not so much a portrait of the time as they were symptomatic of areas of tension. That is, programs like I Led 3 Lives act as what Alan Nadel calls containment narratives—popular representations that negotiate the social tensions of shifting gender identities by asserting an uncomplicated and uniform patriarchal order. The Cold War was a period of containment in which, as Alan Nadel writes, “the virtue of conformity—to some idea of religion, to ‘middle-class values,’ to distinct gender roles and rigid courtship rituals—became a form of public knowledge through the pervasive performances of and allusions to containment narratives.”32
But although such rigidly constrained narratives made persuasive appeals to conformity, they also demonstrated the distance between family audiences and the idealized proto-families that paraded before them on the small screen.

On the television program *I Led 3 Lives*, the family requires the full support of the FBI to maintain its coherence—but at least once it gets that support it is able to achieve some measure of stability. The program might, however, be read more critically as a compensatory gesture that exposes its own anxieties and points of slippage. For as Stuart Hall has argued, popular texts are marked by a double movement, a tension between containment and critique.\(^3\) We might then consider how the idealized family unit of *I Led 3 Lives* compared to the shifting family patterns and nascent feminist movement that motivated the program's anxieties about the family in the first place. Instead of examining only the strategic ideological closure of *I Led 3 Lives*, we might read its representations of the family and Communism as a culturally productive feedback loop—a tautology that continually defers debate over these sites of anxiety by shifting their terms and displacing one onto the other.

The gendered narrative of this televisual history conflates domestic tensions over sexuality and the family with global political discourses on the Cold War, voicing anxieties about each via the representational tropes of the other. But this referential system in *I Led 3 Lives* is unstable, and the tenuous tautology of gender and Communism threatens to collapse and undo the program's strategy of containment. Critics like Nadel and Liebman have convincingly argued that containment narratives were largely successful in 1950s American popular culture and that they only began to fray a decade later, when the referential logic of Communism and gender exposed its own contradictory underpinnings. But *I Led 3 Lives*, a televisual history supported not by facts and events but by the gendered narrative authority of its protagonist, was perhaps one of the first critical ruptures in the veneer of Cold War conformity. Thus, Nadel's analysis of the 1961 political crisis of the Bay of Pigs seems to have an antecedent in this early 1950s television program. He writes: "The fiasco manifested a national narrative whose singular authority depended on uncontrollable doubling, a gendered narrative whose coupling depended on unstable distinctions, a historical narrative that functioned independently of events, a form of writing that undermined the authority of its referents."\(^3\)

Nadel argues that it took such a media event to expose the commingling of nationalism and patriarchy and open that dualism to popular critique. *I Led 3 Lives*‘s doubling of historical and narrative authority is perhaps an earlier, if less forceful, moment that similarly exposes the gendering of historical and political agency in the 1950s. Red vixens like Comrade Marta, who would rather crack a skull than a smile, may have voiced troubling tensions about which June Cleaver and Harriet Nelson dared not speak. And the weekly trials of Herb Philbrick, whose performative reiterations of patriarchal authority as head of the house and agent of history were constantly assaulted from within and without, may have been one of the moments on American television when the first cracks in the crumbling facade of Cold War masculinity began to show.
Certainly, this moment at which TV established itself as narrator of history stacked the deck in favor of the domestic father. *I Led 3 Lives* reminds us continually that the individualized American male is to be the agent of historical change and the subject of every “true” historical narrative. But counternarratives of American history lurk just at the margins of this cautionary tale. Figures like the ten-year-old Communist historian Beth are there to remind us that history itself is a terrain of infinite debate and struggle. And the strangely contorted history told by *I Led 3 Lives* reveals itself time and time again to be a battle over knowledge—over who can produce it, who has the power to act upon it, and who will contextualize it. Perhaps the show’s fictional Communist publisher, Jameka Lane, made the most insightful critique of the historiographic strategy of *I Led 3 Lives* from within its own fictive borders: “By mixing up known fact with statements we want the public to accept as true, in most cases it works very well. Basic psychology.”

**Notes**

I would like to thank Lisa Parks, Julie D’Acci, Michele Hilmes, Vance Kepley, John Fiske, and *Cinema Journal*’s anonymous readers for their generous help in commenting on this work. I also appreciate the assistance of the knowledgeable archival staff at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

2. The program used several versions of this introductory voice-over. This particular version was used in later episodes that were not based specifically on Philbrick’s autobiography.
5. A promotional film shown by salesmen to local broadcasters and advertisers begins with the claim, “This is an introduction to the timeliest, most powerful television show ever to be presented to an American audience.” Memo, “Tentative Layout of Presentations Film on *I Led 3 Lives*,” June 6, 1953, UA/Ziv Collection, series 7.7, box 28, folder 10. Sponsors apparently responded quite favorably to the program. The advertising manager of Phillips Petroleum, a major sponsor, wrote that “the interest of this audience has been reflected in favorable customer comments to our Phillips 66 dealers and distributors. And the dealers themselves have taken time to express their satisfaction by writing to us in praise of the show. Many of these letters not only praise the entertainment value of *I Led 3 Lives* but comment on its excellent public service features.” Quoted in Morleen Getz Rouse, “A History of the F. W. Ziv Radio and Television Syndication Companies: 1930–1960” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1976), 357.
6. Dennis Rinzel, “A Description of the Ziv Television Series: *I Led 3 Lives*” (master’s thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1975), 88. Rinzel’s thesis has been a valuable resource for investigating the series. He conducted several interviews with key production personnel in the 1970s, and his exhaustive research about Ziv sales strategies and local ratings was an asset to this researcher.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 104, 105.
22. Ibid., 263.
25. See Gwendolyn Wright, Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), for an account of discourses of suburban retreat that marked the periods after both World Wars I and II.
27. In 1951, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover publicly praised Herb’s wife for coping with the pressures of his work. His letter to Eva paid homage to her personal sacrifices, proclaiming, “The victories of the Philbrick adventure were undoubtedly attributable in no small part to the additional responsibilities assumed by you and to your loyal and faithful devotion to [your husband] and to your country. You must have endured endless suffering. . . . I want to commend you for a task well done and to extend my sincerest appreciation.” Cited in New York Herald Tribune brochure, UA/Ziv Collection, series 7.7, box 28, folder 14.
29. Lieberman, Living Room Lectures, 25.
30. Ibid.
34. Nadel, Containment Culture, 6.