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Republic of New Africa

Christian Davenport

Excerpt

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## Introduction

### Met Any American Communists Lately?

Between 1919 and the late 1950s, the Communist Party of the United States of America (CP-USA) engaged in a wide variety of challenges directed against the U.S. government and its economic system. Because of this, many aspects of the organization became well known to the American public. Indeed, in their day, the names of the organizational leadership (i.e., William Foster, Earl Browder, and Eugene Dennis) were as popular as any at the time. Bent on dramatically transforming U.S. political-economic relations, the Party attempted to raise awareness regarding the evils of the American political-economic system and engage in numerous struggles against it. The activities put forth toward these ends were as numerous as they were varied, from editorials to unionization to political campaigns to mass protests. The locales varied as well. Focused initially on major cities, efforts began to emerge seemingly everywhere. Within the context of international conflict with the former Soviet Union, which was believed and later found to have supported the Party financially as well as ideologically, the behavioral threat presented was very real. If the Party achieved all that it wanted, nothing would be the same in the United States.

In response to the activities mentioned earlier, the U.S. government engaged in a similarly wide variety of repressive strategies to identify, constrain, and destroy the “commies.” By most accounts, this was the most thorough initiative of its kind in American history. Over the period of the challenge, the American Communist Party was officially banned, and government agents throughout the country assembled lists of members as well as their activities (real and imagined). In turn, suspected and real activists were harassed, detained, questioned, arrested, beaten, deported, and, in rare cases, executed. Equally important, U.S. civil society participated in the persecution of Communists, as private citizens informed on suspected communists and corporations identified as well as

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Christian Davenport

Excerpt

[More information](#)

fired suspected members and sympathizers. Name lists were also distributed to different organizations and individuals throughout the country so that none of the blacklisted could be hired or given places to live or rent. In effect, the Red Scare led to the Red Purge.

The outcome of the search-and-destroy mission led by U.S. political authorities was seemingly no less than a devastating removal of all things Communist in American life (e.g., Goldstein 1978; Schrecker 1998). Over time, membership in the Communist Party decreased to a small number of hardliners and the number of spinoff organizations increased and then declined, as did the number of newspapers and the activities of the relevant dissidents associated with them. By the 1960s, if one was Red, then one was essentially dead – jobless, friendless, shunned, and scorned. In this context, repressive behavior appeared to work exactly as planned: upon being targeted by the American government, the challenging organization basically ceased to exist along with the activities, individuals, and many elements of the ideology associated with them.

Now, although repression appeared to play a major role in the destruction of CP-USA, this has not been the only explanation offered. For example, some, like Lipset and Marks (2001), argue that what accounted for the demise of the Communists (and the Socialists, for that matter) was not persecution but the fact that Americans simply did not find their message attractive. Here the strengths of and opportunities within the U.S. political-economy offered to many a piece of the American pie, thereby decreasing the necessity for and interest in the leftist organization. Others noted that the movement was essentially devastated by developments within the USSR and its violent totalitarian practices, which led to significant disagreements in the Communist Party about whom they should and should not be affiliated with and what they should and should not do. Here, confronted with the reality of actual Communism, many just stopped working for and affiliating with the cause, splintering into different factions and later disengaging from contentious politics altogether.

What is important about these alternative explanations for the decline of CP-USA is the fact that they move away from the singular possibility that it was repression that did the Communists in toward a broader consideration of multiple factors at the same time where repressive behavior was merely one among several associated with the challengers' demise.

### **The Surge Worked, Didn't It?**

More than once, presidential candidate John McCain berated his opponent and future U.S. president Barack Obama with the question, "You admit that the surge [i.e., the enhanced counterinsurgent effort in Iraq during 2007] worked, don't you?" By "worked," he meant that the violent behavior undertaken by insurgent Iraqis associated with al-Qaeda diminished following U.S. action. After a few attempts at trying to contextualize his opinion about war in general

Cambridge University Press

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Republic of New Africa

Christian Davenport

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

as well as other issues that he wished to highlight (most notably the economy and the Bush administration's numerous shortcomings), Obama conceded that "yes, the surge worked." This concession was important. McCain and Obama would go back and forth several times on various issues, but on this point they would join with many others arguing that government repression had weakened al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

The basic point was simple. Prior to the surge, AQI violence was on the rise. Before this time, al-Qaeda seemed able to do what they wished, hitting targets all over the country, even those believed to be difficult (i.e., within zones of control held by the United States). After the surge, however, AQI violence decreased. The impact was seemingly a clear one: repression hindered AQI's ability to recruit, train, and engage in operations, similar to the situation with the U.S. Communist Party. With this realization, McCain, Obama, General Petraeus, and Rush Limbaugh made their case for effective counterinsurgent policy.

But did the surge "work"? Over time, a small but growing opinion began to emerge, suggesting that the surge might not be the cause of the decreased violence in Iraq (Inman and Davenport 2012). Some noted that the surge came *after* and not before the decrease in violent behavior. Some noted that AQI violence might have decreased because a large number of people had left the area, leaving fewer individuals to kill. Some noted that the earlier violence was severe enough that worthwhile targets could not be found. Some noted that AQI was not weakened and incapable but that they were simply waiting for the occupiers to leave and major counterinsurgent efforts to dissipate; here the situation was one of abeyance, not defeat. The differences are important because, again, we find that repressive action was merely one among several explanations for the end of a dissident organization. Additionally, we find that (once more) it was not clear what role it played and how much of the explanation it accounted for.

**Secession Interrupted?**

In 1968, a group of African Americans came together in Detroit to form the Republic of New Africa (RNA). The objective of this organization was simple: secede from the United States, claim five states for the new nation, obtain hundreds of millions for reparations for the damage done by and since slavery, and have a plebiscite of all African Americans to see whether they wanted to join. The objectives were ambitious and the tactics associated with them bold: Afro-centric education, repeated conferences on nation building, and standing up to police raids. Initially, the group received a significant amount of attention from local, state, and federal media. There was also a significant buzz among the African American community. By 1968, black nationalism had risen in popularity over the more moderate civil rights movement, and African Americans began to flock to organizations like the RNA.

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Christian Davenport

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Along with the increased activity and attention of the media and black population, however, came the attention and action of diverse government agents. Lumped under the general category of black nationalism or hate groups, the RNA was subject to a wide number of repressive activities, including physical and electronic surveillance as well as informant and agent provocateur raids, mass arrests, and shootouts. The rate and intensity of government action was nothing at the level of an organization like the Black Panther Party, which was heralded as the most dangerous organization in the United States at the time, but nevertheless the behavior directed against the organization was not inconsequential.

Over time, like the membership of the Communist Party and al-Qaeda, the number of RNA members dwindled, and their activities decreased in frequency as well as scope. What accounted for the organization's demise? On one hand, it seemed that government behavior was directly responsible for the RNA's end. How could a challenging organization persist under such scrutiny and negative sanctions? On the other hand, it seemed that the RNA itself was responsible. How could a challenging organization continue to advocate and pursue an ambitious goal such as the one they were pursuing on a shoe-string budget and with such a wide variety of strong-willed individuals pulling in distinct directions? The answers to these questions have been unclear, with researchers, former RNA members, and observers maintaining diverse positions.

The present volume is interested in shedding some much-needed light on this topic – specifically with regard to the RNA but generally with regard to all institutions behaviorally challenging political authorities. To go forward on this journey, however, we must first go back.

### The Puzzle, Research Question, and Motivation

In many respects, the subject of this investigation is an old one. As long as nation-states have existed, groups of individuals have emerged to challenge political and economic leaders, institutions, and the practices associated with them. Toward this end, people have come together in social movement organizations,<sup>1</sup> they have articulated changes that they would like to see

<sup>1</sup> Others are interested in “terrorist” and/or “insurgent” organizations where it is generally the case that such institutions are banned by law. In the case of social movement organizations, although legally facilitated in many countries (especially in democracies), the organizations can still be subject to a variety of different sanctions from political authorities. To be clear, I am interested in social movement organizations (i.e., “a complex, or formal, organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a countermovement and attempts to implement those goals”; McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1218) as opposed to either social movements (i.e., “a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure”; McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1217) or social movement “industries” (i.e., which represent a constellation of organizations; McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1219). The three are related but distinct.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04149-3 - How Social Movements Die: Repression and Demobilization of the Republic of New Africa

Christian Davenport

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

(i.e., they put forward claims), and they have engaged in specific activities to signal their dissatisfaction to those in charge, prompting some effort toward their desired objective (i.e., they participate in claims making). In response, agents of the state have sought to protect political and economic leaders, institutions, and policies through the application of coercion including, but not limited to, arrests, beating, harassment, agents provocateurs, targeted assassination, raids, torture, disappearances, and mass killing. Repression may not be the first strategy employed or the one used most frequently, but historically, it has been among those receiving the most attention as well as the one people most fear.

While the action-counteraction identified is essentially ubiquitous within modern nation-states (partially defining them, in fact), something else is also commonly observed but less commonly discussed. Here I am referring to the fact that many (if not most) of the challenging organizations, the individuals associated with them, the tactics they employ, and/or the challenges they advocate seemingly die off (i.e., go away, disappear, are withdrawn). That is, people making a specific claim (claims makers) stop coming together, group objectives (claims) are no longer pursued, social movement organizations (institutions that represent the claims makers) cease to exist, and the behavioral challenges used to reach the specific ends are no longer undertaken.

What is the reason for the death of a particular behavioral challenger? As noted earlier, and in line with advocates of protest policing and counterterrorism and insurgency as well as those who discuss political order and state failure, one explanation concerns the repressive efforts taken by governments against the challengers. In the face of expected or actual arrests, beatings, mass killing, and so forth, it makes sense that individuals seek to diminish the possibility of such activity by leaving the targeted organization and ceasing to engage in collective action deemed problematic for those in power. Demobilizing would likely reduce the sanctions imposed against them as they would no longer be threatening. In this case, *repression kills social movement organizations*.

It is also possible, however, that movement organizations die off for other reasons. For example, people engaged in social struggle might simply get tired of each other. They might get fed up with the seemingly endless meetings, unattended events, and underappreciated effort. Members might get turned off by endless debates and basic disagreements regarding what should be done, when, where, and how. In this case, *social movement organizations kill social movement organizations*.

Although I am interested in what impact both explanations have on challenger demobilization, I frame my discussion in a way that privileges the first, asking, *What role does repression play in ending a social movement organization in conjunction with/juxtaposed against other factors?* There are several reasons for such an approach.

First, the interest in efficiently using the coercive power held by nation-states is among one of the longest held in international and comparative

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Christian Davenport

Excerpt

[More information](#)

politics. Indeed, it is intricately connected with definitions as well as theories of the nation-state itself (e.g., consider the work of Hobbes and Weber). In this framework, government wields a monopoly of coercive power that offsets the development and use of nongovernmental coercive power within civil society by social movement organizations and other challengers (e.g., terrorists and insurgents).

Second, exactly how government functions in the capacity of societal protection is not well understood, although by one metric, governments do quite well. For example, most nation-states persist over time, and regime change, revolution, and significant modification to a national political-economy are rare. If one were to consider the relevant scholarship regarding specific acts of coercion or general coercive behavior directed against those challenging governments, however, the findings are quite mixed. For example, evaluating the influence of repression on dissident behavior, every single finding, including no finding, has been identified. Within this work, repression increases dissent (e.g., Francisco 1996, 2004; Lichbach and Gurr 1981); decreases dissent (e.g., Hibbs 1973); initially decreases and at higher values increases dissent (e.g., Muller 1985); and decreases dissent over time (e.g., Rasler 1996) and it is alternatively negative or positive (e.g., Gupta and Venieris 1981; Moore 1998); has varied effects depending on the type of repression and aspect of dissent (e.g., Koopmans 1993; Earl and Soule 2010); and has no impact whatsoever (e.g., Gurr and Moore 1997). This is highly problematic from the view discussed earlier, because if part of the reason for repression is so that governments can fend off challengers and reduce behavior that could adversely affect authorities as well as the political-economic structure that relies upon it, then they do not do well at all.<sup>2</sup> Finally, when confronting one of the largest and one of the rarest challenges to the state, armed insurgency, governments seem to fare better, but this worsens over time. For example, civil war researchers find that for much of the post-World War II period, governments generally vanquished rebels in their confrontations, but after the Cold War, these engagements generally ended in negotiated settlement.

While useful in getting a general idea of what repression might do, the research is generally limited, for it does not consider alternative explanations for the death of a single challenging institution. Specifically, it ignores what is taking place within the dissident challenge itself, which might also account for the demise of those in opposition to government.

To address the topic, my effort initially juxtaposes the external (repression-oriented) explanations, where social movement organization demise is determined by the repressive efforts of governments only, against internal (challenger-oriented) explanations, where the demise of a social movement organization has nothing at all to do with repression but with the social movement organizations themselves. Such an inquiry allows us to understand how effective governments are at performing one of their oldest, most important

<sup>2</sup> This presumes that increased dissent is bad for the political-economy.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04149-3 - How Social Movements Die: Repression and Demobilization of the Republic of New Africa

Christian Davenport

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

and highly controversial functions. While considering the two rival explanations, I introduce a third: *that the demise of social movement organizations involves an interaction between social movement organizations and the efforts put forth by governments to counter or destroy them*. This essentially takes one of the most widely supported findings of the social movement literature – that emergence has something to do with the character of the environment as well as something to do with the character of the movement institution – and uses this insight to explain why social movement organizations die (or terminate).

To conduct my analysis, I construct and then evaluate a unique database concerning both *external repression* undertaken by federal, state, and local police against a U.S. black secessionist movement organization, the RNA, including overt as well as covert activity, as well as *internal organizational dynamics* within the RNA, including discussions, meetings, conferences, and protest. These activities took place between 1968 and 1973 (discussed further later). The results of this research are quite informative. Specifically, I find that both external repression and internal movement dynamics played a role in RNA demobilization, decreasing individuals (members), ideas (claims) associated with the initial claims-making effort, institutions (formal organizations), and interventions (actions). For example, the investigation reveals that overt repression (e.g., arrests, raids, and trials) generally depleted the RNA below a certain threshold but only for a brief amount of time. In contrast, severe repression (i.e., violent and/or large-scale activity) diminished organizational functionality (e.g., participation, discussions, optimism, and behavior) for a longer period, but this did not deliver the fatal blow, and in certain circumstances, these activities served as a rallying point (a “backlash”). Viewing a tactic much less considered in the relevant literature, the research further discloses that covert repressive action (i.e., RNA fear of infiltration and surveillance) significantly weakened the social movement organization. In many respects, I maintain that it had a more profound influence than overt behavior.

These latter influences are especially interesting because even though the RNA was aware of the deleterious impact that repressive action would have on them, and there was some willingness to initially trust those in charge of the dissident institution despite immense risk, the organization’s capacity to counter the government’s effort was undermined by two factors that were largely internal to the movement and that preceded the repressive behavior directed against them. First, the RNA was unable to deliver on the objectives that it set for itself (e.g., establishing a new government with an active citizenry as well as landmass in the United States of America). Second, the RNA was unable to accurately comprehend what repressive action would be directed against them (expecting overt as opposed to covert activity). Both of these problems reduced the trust of those within the RNA, which further undermined their ability to function and made them vulnerable to subsequent repressive activity. Small, fractionalized, distrustful, and generally struggling, the group was an easy target.



Cambridge University Press

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Christian Davenport

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Although it is difficult to assess the precise causal sequence, it is clear that sequence matters. As a consequence, there is no discussing the termination of movement organization without addressing movement organization initiation and dynamics. Specifically, I argue that the contradictions in group ideology that developed at the founding set the RNA on a specific path, which, after the RNA experienced repression, increased the likelihood of specific types of movement demobilization. This is largely attributed to the organization's understanding of repressive behavior, how it would likely be targeted, their preparation for such behavior, and the match-mismatch between the organization's expectations and the reality of what they actually experienced. Great divergence in opinion and difficulty in overcoming relevant differences (e.g., owing to factionalization) facilitated demobilization, whereas divergence in opinion and flexible adaptation in addressing problems diminished it.

Why should we care about this topic? There are several reasons for such an inquiry.

First, if repression has no impact at all on social movement organizations or if it makes dissident behavior more radical in terms of what dissidents ask for and/or what dissidents do, then this represents a strong indictment against those who advocate the use of government coercion, state repression, and/or human rights violation in all its forms (i.e., protest policing, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency). As international and domestic laws, assorted treaties, and popular perceptions throughout the world have increasingly moved against such behavior, research on this topic could not be more perfectly timed. Despite this context, however, through discussions of states of emergency, states of "exception," and legal derogations, governments have repeatedly been able to justify and receive widespread support for their use of repressive behavior. If it is shown that government coercion is not effective at doing what it sets out to do, however, work leading to this conclusion would represent an important critique of government coercion and the arguments used to support it.

Second, the investigation of repression's influence on social movement organizations would further bring together two areas of inquiry that have largely been ignored, improving our understanding of both: (1) the study of behavioral challenge(r)s to political authorities (e.g., rebellion, insurgency, dissent, social movement organizations) and (2) the study of state repression against behavioral challenge(r)s (e.g., counterinsurgency or terrorism, protest policing, and human rights violations). The former research has generally been concerned with how social movement organizations are created and sustained. Indeed, I would maintain that this is where the bulk of the research on the topic can be found. Comparatively little effort has been directed toward why they are ended. Indeed, this is one of the areas in need of serious research. Similarly, although attention is given to government action taken against challengers (general policing of protests and protesters, such as arrests of individuals engaged in behavioral challenges), many government actions (covert behavior, such as torture and disappearances, as well as informants and agents provocateurs)



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04149-3 - How Social Movements Die: Repression and Demobilization of the Republic of New Africa

Christian Davenport

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

are relatively ignored. The latter research tends to neglect the targets and victims of state repression, focusing instead on what repressive activity is selected, how it is implemented, and what political-economic contexts are most likely to prompt specific forms of it. While this has made sense given the objectives of this research program, it leaves us in a situation where comparatively little effort is extended to understanding what impact repression has on the individuals subjected to it or on the broader society in which these actions take place.<sup>3</sup>

Third, the simultaneous consideration of both social movement organizations and state repression is important, for the combination will provide a more realistic assessment of both. For example, by paying more attention to the dynamics and problems within social movement organizations, repression and its impact on behavioral challenges will be better understood. Similarly, by paying more attention to the dynamics and problems with repressive applications, social movement organizations and their susceptibility to government action will be better understood. Indeed, it is my intention to show that only certain types of social movement organizations at certain periods in their existence will be influenced by repression in a manner that will influence their demobilization. In other contexts, repressive action might not have any impact at all, or it might even have the opposite effect of what political authorities would expect, strengthening resistance and rebellion.

By adopting an approach that considers both governments and repression as well as challengers and dissent, I will also be able to show specifically how particular movement-counter movement origins and processes lead to particular outcomes. In short, I address how certain paths to termination involve distinct patterns of birth and upbringing. In telling the story of the grave, therefore, one has to tell the story of the cradle, middle school, adulthood, and so forth.

**Toward a Better Investigation of Demobilization**

Typically analyses of social movement death are based on detailed historical analyses, which may not be especially clear about issues of definition, operationalization, and systematic evaluation of propositions but which are well adept at identifying causal mechanisms as well as providing the raw material for theory building. Alternatively, researchers drawing conclusions from detailed statistical examinations, which are better in terms of definition, operationalization, and testing rival hypotheses, often infer relationships from highly aggregated (frequently at the nation-year) or poorly measured data (proxies that are quite distant from the thing they are supposed to measure). These

<sup>3</sup> Although there is some research directly related to the current book, referred to as the conflict-repression nexus (e.g., Lichbach 1987), there are many limitations with this work that, aside from inconclusivity, preclude its usefulness (discussed briefly later in this chapter and in greater detail within the next few chapters).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04149-3 - How Social Movements Die: Repression and Demobilization of the Republic of New Africa

Christian Davenport

Excerpt

[More information](#)

might obscure causal mechanisms and ignore factors such as group discussions and emotional experiences, which bear directly on how social movement organizations are supposed to be influenced by state repression and are notoriously difficult to measure. Prior research (especially quantitative work) also tends to treat all relationships as if sequencing and timing were irrelevant, ignoring the fact that specific sequences or events that happened earlier might have important influences on what takes place later.<sup>4</sup>

Fundamentally shifting the approach used to examine the influence of repression on dissent, however, I argue that perhaps one of the best ways to study the topic is to systematically evaluate discussions, actions, and relationships between members of social movement organizations in day-to-day dissident gatherings (e.g., meetings, conferences, and workshops as well as protest events, doing so in a way that facilitates nuanced evaluation and interpretation). Here one can gauge the impact of repressive action and social movement behavior on movement demobilization as well as the dynamic interaction between these two factors. Indeed, it is my argument that the effect of repression on social movement organizations is conditioned by the challengers' attempts to prepare its members for repressive behavior (what I call *reappraisal*) and to sustain organizational *trust* while governments are trying to undermine both of these efforts through *overwhelming* (doing more than what is expected), *outwitting* (doing something different than what is expected), and cultivating *distrust* (doing things to reduce a person's willingness to put his or her life in someone else's hands). Without addressing these issues, one simply cannot understand what repression is or is not doing to or within challenging institutions. To understand (de)mobilization, therefore, one must address the meso (dissident organizations) and micro (individual challengers).

Although repressive behavior can prove damaging to social movement organizations, limiting resources and effective action, it is not until the movement organization can no longer prepare for repression and sustain trust that demobilization proves likely. Relationships here are not only dynamic but also context specific. The sequences of activities and counteractivities are important to highlight. After significant efforts to prepare for its influence, repressive behavior is less likely effective than that which takes place before challengers have been able to develop a response. A form of repression that is different from that discussed or prepared for (outwitting) is more disruptive on an SMO than a form that is discussed or prepared for but is greater than anticipated (overwhelming). Similarly, repressive action has different effects on challenging organizations where a significant amount of trust has been cultivated as opposed to challengers where trust does not exist.

The approach put forward in this book is distinct from what is traditionally found in the literature because I am not explicitly going to test a particular argument, nor am I going to provide some case history and extract some

<sup>4</sup> For important exceptions, see Davenport (1996) and Loyle et al. (2012).