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WOMEN ORGANIZING TRANSNATIONALLY: THE COMMITTEE OF CORRESPONDENCE, 1952-1969



The records include extensive official correspondence as well as hundreds of letters to and from correspondents throughout the world documenting the work of the organization. In addition there are official records; minutes; complete files of multi-lingual publications entitled "Community Action Series" and "Meeting Community Needs;" miscellaneous publications; conferences and workshop material; oral history transcripts, 1988-89, with related biographical material and writings by individuals; and card files on individual participants, filed by country. The country files also contain published materials pertaining to the status and problems of the world's women.

Date Range: 1952-1969

Content: 56,645 images

Source Library: Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College

Detailed Description:

The Committee of Correspondence Records, 1952-1989, provide a rich collection from which to explore gendered aspects of Cold War liberalism, the United States government's clandestine and overt cultural propaganda operations, women's relationships to US foreign policy, and the varied goals and methods of women's international organizations that interacted in United Nations forums and at international conferences during the first two decades of the Cold War. Like other Western women's international organizations that participated at the UN through the newly established Commission on the Status of Women, the Committee advocated for women's involvement in foreign policy making and in the post war global governance system; and like other US women's organizations, they promoted the spread of "American values" around the globe and networking among women leaders in developed and developing nations. The Records include administrative files comprised of meeting minutes, internal memos, correspondence, and legal and financial documents; Committee publications including the monthly Bulletin and special edition newsletters; publications of international women's organizations and the United Nations; organizational records and proceedings of conferences, women's leadership seminars, and workshops hosted by the Committee in the United States and abroad; correspondence and

contacts with other international women's organizations based in the United States and Europe; correspondence and contacts with individuals and organizations and sponsorship of field workers in Africa, Latin America and Asia; and photographs. While the Committee of Correspondence operated from 1952 until 1969, the Records also include oral histories of Committee members and staff that were conducted during the 1980s by Jacqueline Van Voris, who was commissioned to write a brief organizational history, *The Committee of Correspondence: Women with a World Vision*, published in 1989, for the Sophia Smith Collection in Northampton, Massachusetts where the Records are archived.

The women who founded the Committee of Correspondence in April 1952—Rose Parsons, a vice president of the International Council of Women and president of its American affiliate, the National Council of Women, and journalist Dorothy Bauman who consulted on Women's Affairs with the United States Information Agency (USIA) during the Eisenhower Administration — believed they were engaged in a contest for the hearts and minds of influential women leaders in developing and newly independent countries who could be misled by Soviet lies and 'negative' propaganda that criticized the US government and society. In this respect they were among the American intellectuals and activists of the 1950s and 1960s who earned the appellation 'Cold War liberal'. Cold War liberalism referenced a skeptical or realistic liberalism driven by anti-communist conviction and fear of totalitarianism emanating from, or emulating, the Soviet Union. Cold War liberals continued to believe in the power of democratic governments to promote social progress and in the innate 'goodness' of the individual, but they had witnessed the devastating attacks on humanity that Nazi Germany and Stalinist Soviet Russia had wrought at mid twentieth century and were determined that individual freedom and democratic justice would prevail in the post World War II world. Parsons and Bauman recruited a small number of like-minded women from among their voluntary association networks to form the 'Committee of Correspondence' at a critical Cold War moment during the Korean War. Although they were determined to provide 'positive' propaganda and to counteract charges spread through the socialist world press that US-led forces used biological weapons to wage war on the North Korean communists, these women also promoted an internationalist 'women's advancement' agenda in addition to their nationalist Cold War political agenda, based on their belief that male-led governments worldwide underestimated women's role as public opinion-makers, and that women's political participation was necessary to establish truly democratic nations.

The original members of the Committee of Correspondence—Constance Anderson, Louise Backus, Eunice Carter, Julie d'Estournelles Herzog, Anne Hester, Mildred Horton, Hannah Kiep, Charlotte Mahon, Betka Papanek, Lena Madesin Phillips, Anna Lord Strauss—were all invited to join the Committee personally by Rose Parsons and were all active leaders in women's voluntary organizations or were knowledgeable about international affairs. They quickly determined to connect with their widespread networks and contacts among women leaders abroad to counter what they believed to be dangerous Communist misinformation about the US government and society, and to spread constructive propaganda about American accomplishments in the fields of child welfare, peace activism, women's rights and political participation, community building, technical assistance to developing nations,

and more. Although never growing larger than twenty-some members and associates, and employing at its height of operations in the mid 1960s an executive director, several secretarial staff, and two 'field workers' who sponsored and supervised programs for women in Africa and Latin America, the Committee developed a mailing list for their publications of over 5000 correspondents in nearly 140 countries.

The name these women chose for their organization reflected their beliefs that they were carrying on in the tradition of American Patriots of the Revolutionary War era. The Committee of Correspondence slogan, 'The Truth Shall Set You Free', and the Committee's first newsletter intended to present 'honest facts and helpful information' about the false accusation of germ warfare employed in Korea. In their first year of operation, they also circulated information to present the US government's case against the Soviet spies, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg; to expose the sham of the Soviet-sponsored December 1952 Congress of the People for Peace; and to publicize Soviet manipulations behind the Women's International Democratic Federation whose representatives of women's organizations in socialist countries interacted with Western-led women's international organizations through the UN Commission on the Status of Women. The Committee's first published *Bulletins* focused on topics such as "The Emotional, Social and Spiritual Growth of the World's Children", "Participation of Women in Political and Public Life: Forty Years of Progress, 1913-1953", "International Friendship at Work";, "Progress in the Field of Labor", and "The Negro in the United States of America."

Yet as the Committee presented itself as one of a growing number of women's nongovernmental organizations that were made up of 'concerned individuals' and funded by private foundation supporters, they also engaged in hypocritical actions. Parsons, Bauman, and a few other 'knowing' Committee members solicited funds from US government sources funneled through Central Intelligence Agency-created foundations, and they selectively informed their fellow Committee of Correspondence members about the source of these funds. They also kept this CIA sponsorship a secret from their foreign correspondents and from other the other women's organizations with which they interacted. This major breach of faith was the Committee's undoing when *Ramparts* magazine reported that the CIA had been funding the Committee of Correspondence and several other ostensibly independent organizations, including most prominently the National Students Association, in February 1967, and the *New York Times* ran the *Ramparts* exposé as front page news. Initially the 'knowing' Committee members tried to deny the CIA connection, but they soon owned up to the truth and confessed to the full membership. Consequently, the Committee suffered from internal division, and could not convince independent donors to fund their organizational activities. The Committee disbanded in February 1969.

Questions remain regarding the extent of CIA influence in shaping Committee activities prior to 1967, especially regarding the Committee's programming in Latin America, a region where the CIA conducted many covert operations to combat the perceived communist threat and where the US government launched the Alliance for Progress in 1961 that focused public and private aid and investment to develop Latin American economies and strengthen democratic states.

Additional questions also remain about the CIA's role in a major Middle Eastern women's conference that the Committee organized in collaboration with Iranian Princess Ashraf, Shah Reza Pahlavi's sister, held in Teheran in 1963. Even if the CIA was not involved in funding this Middle Eastern conference, the records of this international meeting that focused on the 'Role of Women in the Community' provide rich raw materials for explorations of cross-cultural women's organizing, including Western women's interventions in Islamic countries and attempts to understand regional politics.

Whether or not they suspected the Committee's covert connection to the CIA, other women's international nongovernmental organizations were careful to distance themselves from the Committee's obvious Cold War anti-communism. The Committee's efforts to organize a seminar for the executives of leading democratic international and regional women's organizations of the 'free world' in the early 1960s were resisted by many of the 'WINGOS'—the women's international nongovernmental organizations in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council or UN specialized agencies—that did not want to be associated exclusively with the United States' foreign policy agenda. Nonetheless, the Committee was not the only women's NGO to collaborate openly with the US government aid agencies during this era and the politics of Western women's international organizations during the Cold War is another topic to be explored through this document collection.

The Committee worked openly with US-based groups such as the Asia Society, Japan Society, Asia Foundation, Women's Africa Committee, Foreign Policy Association, World Affairs Center, and Institute of International Education, that all had received funding from or collaborated on programs with the Department of State, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) created in 1961, and the United States Information Agency (USIA) created in 1953. The Committee also worked with these US government agencies, as did other NGOs that attended foreign policy briefings and conferences held at the State Department during the 1960s. USIA Women's Affairs officers consulted with Committee of Correspondence members on a regular basis during the 1960s when the Agency wanted to host programs for international visitors to the United States, or to gain access to women leaders abroad, or to disseminate positive propaganda about the United States through Committee *Bulletins* or other correspondence. The USIA and USAID encouraged the Committee to develop contacts with women leaders in South Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries where the US military was engaged in anti-communist combat. When the Committee's CIA sponsorship was exposed in 1967, the Committee's Executive Director, Anne Crolus, resigned and was hired by USAID as the Women's Affairs officer in the Office of Civil Operations in Saigon, South Vietnam.

The USAID also invited the Committee to develop NGO networks to promote women's programming in Latin America, and to host training seminars for Latin American women in New York and Washington DC. African women leaders in the newly independent states also received leadership training and other educational programming devised by the Committee through its 'field worker', Sarale Owens, who was sent to work with African women's organizations in Nigeria, Uganda, Tanganyika, Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia and Kenya from 1961 to 1963.

In examining these regional initiatives there are many opportunities for scholars to sort through the various ways—through expression of ideas or through actions—that the Committee of Correspondence expressed solidarity with global women as they sought to gain entry into international and national political and civic arenas. The American women members of the Committee of Correspondence truly had a "world vision," as their institutional historian Jacqueline Van Voris has asserted. Conversely, scholars can explore the ways that the American Committee members could not break free of their nationalist roots and undermined other interests of women in developing countries who resisted Cold War paradigms that the US government was promoting, and that Committee publications and programs supported.

These Records provide a great deal of information that will engage historians, political scientists and communications scholars regarding the Committee of Correspondence members and their goals, as well as some information regarding the reception of the Committee's (and the US government's) messages that can be inferred through the foreign correspondents' communications back to the Committee.

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