

FROM ANTI-WAR TO PRO-WAR:
PETE SEEGER AND WOODY GUTHRIE
DURING WORLD WAR II

A Master's Thesis

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December 2020

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Bilkent University 2020

To my family



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of
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ABSTRACT

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Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, two legendary figures of American folk music, lived through some of the most tumultuous periods of the history of the United States. The circumstances they grew up in and the people they encountered led them to meet communism in the 1930s. Being two independent souls, they were not registered members of the Communist Party but walked on the same path for years as “fellow travelers.” Both men claimed that they wrote and sang songs for the causes they believed in without being subjects of a larger organization. However, an analysis on their political views from the late 1930s to the early 1940s, particularly their change of political stance in the aftermath of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, indicates that their political mindset was in close resemblance with the stance of the Communist Party. This thesis narrates the story of how Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie became firm supporters of the United States’ entrance into World War II with all their war songs in a matter of months even though they previously displayed a strict anti-war stance with many songs manifesting their

standpoint, and how this change was in near-perfect alignment with that of the Communist Party.

Keywords: American Folk Music, Communism, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, World War II.



ÖZET

SAVAŞ KARŞITLIĞINDAN SAVAŞ TARAFTARLIĞINA: İKİNCİ DÜNYA SAVAŞI'NDA PETE SEEGER VE WOODY GUTHRIE

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Aralık 2020

Amerikan halk müziğinin iki efsane ismi olan Pete Seeger ve Woody Guthrie, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri tarihinin en çalkantılı dönemlerinden birinde yaşamıştır. Büyüdükleri çevreler, içinde bulundukları şartlar ve karşılaştıkları insanlar, bu iki ismi 1930'lu yıllarda komünizmle tanıştırmıştır. İkili, bağımsız bir duruşa sahip olmayı önemsedikleri için bilinçli bir şekilde Komünist Parti'ye resmi olarak üye olmamış, ancak yıllar boyu komünist ideolojinin birer “yoldaşı” olarak aynı yolda yürümüşlerdir. Her ne kadar hem Seeger, hem de Guthrie, herhangi bir organizasyona veya kuruluşa bağlı olmaksızın, sadece kendilerinin inandığı değerler ve davalar uğruna şarkılar yazıp söylediklerini ifade etmişlerse de, ikilinin 1930'lu yılların sonlarından 1940'lı yılların başlarına dek sahip oldukları politik görüşler ve özellikle de Sovyetler Birliği'nin Haziran 1941'de Alman işgaline uğramasından sonra bu görüşlerinde yaşanan önemli değişiklikler analiz edildiğinde, bu iki ismin politik duruşlarının Komünist Parti'nin o dönemki politikalarıyla büyük benzerlik içinde olduğu görülmektedir. Bu çalışma, Pete Seeger ve Woody Guthrie'nin katı bir savaş karşıtı duruşa ve bunu savunan pek çok şarkıya sahipken bu görüşlerinin nasıl

büyük bir hızla değiştiğini, aylar içinde nasıl ve neden Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin İkinci Dünya Savaşı'na girmesinin coşkulu birer destekçisi haline geldiklerini, bunu o dönemde yazdıkları yeni savaş şarkılarıyla nasıl ifade ettiklerini, ve politik duruşlarındaki bu ani değişimin Komünist Parti'nin politikalarıyla ne denli büyük bir uyum içinde olduğunu incelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Amerikan Halk Müziği, İkinci Dünya Savaşı, Komünizm, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie.



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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Songs make history. History makes songs.

Irving Berlin¹

1.1 Structure and Objectives

It cannot be denied that music is and has always been a conveyor of political messages, and it is not always necessary to be professionally equipped or educated to understand the political content in music. Folk music, specifically, has historically embraced the method of conveying political messages of the folksingers to the “folks” themselves. Folk music is not merely a set of songs and tunes but more of a working practice, argues American scholar and ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin.² It is more than just a genre, but something that is worth discussing in the framework of history and politics, and it is what this study is mainly concerned with. This thesis

¹ John Bush Jones, *The Songs That Fought the War* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 1.

² Mark Slobin, *Folk Music: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

focuses on two of the most prominent figures of American folk music, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, and how their political stances went through significant changes both as individual folk musicians before World War II, and as members of the Almanac Singers³ over the course of the war.

Societies undergo significant changes during wartimes, and World War II played its fair share of role in this sense. Some even take this claim further to suggest that the effect of World War II was greater than any other war in the history of the United States, leaving approximately a million American soldiers killed or wounded.⁴

During his presidential election campaign of 1940, Franklin D. Roosevelt had promised to keep his country out of the war by assuring the American families that “your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars.”⁵ However, approximately two months after the election and being elected president for an unprecedented third term, he defined the role of the United States in the war as the great arsenal of democracy, promising to help the British in their fight against the Axis powers.⁶

In the view of historian William E. Leuchtenburg, World War I “left a determination in millions of Americans never to fight again; at no time in our history has the hold of pacifism been stronger than in the interlude between the first and second world

³ American folk music group that was formed in 1941 and disbanded less than two years later. The band’s core members included Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Lee Hays and Millard Lampell, but from time to time several other folk musicians sang along with the actual quartet in various events as visiting members of the group. For details, see: Chapter 3.2.

⁴ William H. Young and Nancy K. Young, *Music of the World War II Era* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 1.

⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Boston, MA - Campaign Address.” (speech, Boston, MA, October 30, 1940), FDR Library, http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/_resources/images/msf/msf01378_

⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Fireside Chat on the ‘Great Arsenal of Democracy.’” (speech, Washington, DC, December 29, 1940), MIT World War II Multimedia Archive, <https://web.mit.edu/21h.102/www/Primary%20source%20collections/World%20War%20II/FDR,%20Arsenal%20of%20Democracy.html>.

wars.”⁷ However, the Pearl Harbor incident in December 1941 changed everything. Even though the American public had slowly become prepared for the idea of taking part in the war by the time Pearl Harbor took place, the still-relatively-high voice of the opponents of the war became lower than ever in the aftermath of the deadliest attack on American soil in the history of the United States.⁸ After all, it was not a foreign war anymore, but an American war, and a just one too.

All in all, World War II left a profound impact on American culture when looked back. Reflections of the hot debates on whether the United States should intervene in the war or not in the early stages of the war, and then the war propaganda, especially after the attack on Pearl Harbor, can be seen in various cultural and artistic productions of that period. Due to its political nature, folk music is one of those areas in which this impact and such reflections of the war can be seen quite clearly. However, for the Almanac Singers, among whose members were the all-time American folk music legends such as Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, the idea of the US entrance into World War II became a necessity for world peace even before Pearl Harbor.

Pete Seeger, the son of a well-situated New-Yorker family, and Woody Guthrie, the son of a rural and relatively poorer family based in Oklahoma, met the communist ideology in the 1930s for the first time and became supporters and followers of Popular Front⁹ policies. Accordingly, both men had embraced a non-interventionist

⁷ William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-32* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 104.

⁸ Jones, *The Songs That Fought the War*, 57.

⁹ A wide alliance of various political groups such as communists, liberals, social democrats and some others against the rising threat of fascism in various countries. Formation of such coalitions all around was called for by the Comintern in 1935 for the first time. For details, see: Chapter 2.1.

stance at the beginning of the war. However, their perception of the war and the idea of the United States' entrance into the war underwent a somewhat sudden change in the summer of 1941, almost six months before Pearl Harbor. This shift in their stance coincided with the inception of Operation Barbarossa when the German-Soviet non-aggression pact came to an end, and the German army progressed towards the lands of the Soviet Union. Moreover, it was only a couple of months ago that they, as members of the Almanac Singers, recorded and published an entire album full of songs denouncing the war, describing its dark and deadly side, and accusing President Roosevelt of being a warmonger.

As the crushing majority of public opinion started to give their full support to the war efforts after the Pearl Harbor attack, the Almanac Singers also went with this flow of patriotism and continued to support the United States' participation to the war against the Axis powers, yet the true motivation lying under this change of stance is worth further research and analysis. Although the members of the band were known to have a varying degree of sympathy towards the communist ideology and the House Committee on Un-American Activities would define the group as "communist entertainers"¹⁰ in the coming years, the Almanac Singers was, in fact, a politically independent group. Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, the two figures who are in the foreground of this study, could be defined as fellow travelers rather than official members of the party.

Fellow traveler is a term that has long been used to describe people who sympathize with the communist cause to a certain degree without officially being a member of a

¹⁰ Committee on Un-American Activities, *Guide to Subversive Organizations and Publications* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961), 11.

communist party.¹¹ The origin of the term can be traced back to Leon Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution*, where he defined several Russian writers (and at some points, artists in a more general sense) as fellow travelers because they remained outside of the party and did not actively take part in the revolution but still supported it and thus walked on the same path with them as fellow companions.¹² In the European and American context, however, the term has been used in a rather pejorative sense. George Orwell argued that such people whom he called fellow travelers desired "to be anti-fascist without being anti-totalitarian."¹³ In other words, fellow travelers were believed to be people who praised the communist ideology but did not want to face any possible consequences of being a communist. When Orwell's accusations are put aside, the definition of the term "fellow traveler" as it is written in dictionaries suits Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger's political stance in the 1930s and later on during World War II almost perfectly.

The author of the first comprehensive biographical book on Woody Guthrie, Ed Cray, directly defines Guthrie as a fellow traveler and refers to his wife to support his claims on political independence. Mary Guthrie argued that the Communist Party would not accept Woody as a member anyway, even if he wanted to become one because he lacked the necessary discipline and ideological commitment for it. In a letter to Alan Lomax¹⁴, Woody Guthrie himself clearly stated, "I ain't a member of

¹¹ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "fellow traveler," accessed September 29, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fellow%20traveler>.

¹² Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1957), chap. 2.

¹³ George Orwell, "Arthur Koestler," in *Critical Essays* (London: Harvill Secker, 2009), chap. 8.

¹⁴ Alan Lomax was the folk musician, folk music archivist and producer who brought Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie together for the first time. For details, see: Chapter 3.1.

any earthly organization.”¹⁵ Another historian, Will Kaufman, describes Guthrie as “an independent, free spirit unattached to political parties or organized movements.”¹⁶ As a result, his political stance could often be hard-to-understand, puzzling, and even inconsistent.¹⁷

Pete Seeger was not much different in terms of his political independence. In an interview, he personally said that his relationship with the communist ideology was actually quite simple to explain: “I was against race discrimination, and communists were against race discrimination. I was in favor of unions, and communists were in favor of unions.”¹⁸ Historian Allan Winkler argues that his political stance was not always in alignment with the policies of the Communist Party. Moreover, as Winkler adds, he was concerned that becoming a member of the party would cause him to lose his observation and reflection skills and thus limit his perception of politics. Therefore, he preferred to stay out of the party and maintain a certain distance.¹⁹

The main objective of this thesis is to analyze the political positioning and the change of stance that Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger went through over the course of World War II as members of the Almanac Singers, to find out how and why this shift from an anti-war stance to pro-war took place, and to see how they defended

¹⁵ Ed Cray, *Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 151, 189.

¹⁶ Will Kaufman, “Woody Guthrie and the Cultural Front,” in *The Life, Music and Thought of Woody Guthrie: A Critical Appraisal*, edited by John S. Partington (New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 35.

¹⁷ Ronald Briley, “‘Woody Sez’: Woody Guthrie, the ‘People’s Daily World,’ and Indigenous Radicalism,” *California History* 84, no.1 (Fall 2006): 30.

¹⁸ *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*, directed by Jim Brown (New York: The Weinstein Company, 2007).

¹⁹ Allan M. Winkler, *To Everything There is a Season: Pete Seeger and the Power of Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 12-13.

and justified the war via their songs while they used the same instruments to make songs for defending otherwise a short time ago. Contrary to all the arguments claiming both men's political independence, the timing of their change of stance during the war and the motivations lying under this change demonstrate that the two fellow travelers did not act so independently after all, and that their policies remained in near-perfect accordance with the ones of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) at the time. The scope of this thesis is not limited to the war years only as it is significant to examine what political views Guthrie and Seeger embraced before the war as well. When we know how they became the people they were in those days, their political stance and the change of mind can be understood more clearly.

After laying out the outline of the entire study in this introductory chapter with a historiographical survey and background information related to the topic of the thesis, the next section, Chapter II, primarily sets the background of the war years by discussing the role of folk music in politics during the 1930s and the political views of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger prior to World War II. With the emergence of the Popular Front in the mid-Thirties, all socialists and progressives were called for a strong alliance in order to put up a fight against the rising threat of fascism all around the world. This new policy marked the period that the Communist Party had its greatest influence on American people.²⁰ Then came the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939), also known as the non-aggression pact, signed between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, which meant the sudden abandonment of the Popular Front by the Communist Party. This was the time when those who were in close ties with the

²⁰ Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 120.

Communist Party had to experience their first political turn in the context of World War II, even before its inception.²¹

The political evolution of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger throughout the 1930s until the formation of the Almanac Singers is the main focus of this chapter. In addition to Lee Hays and Millard Lampell, the Guthrie-Seeger duo constituted the base quartet of the Almanac Singers and remained as the most influential figures of the band from the very beginning until the end.²² Since several other folk musicians such as Bess Lomax Hawes, Cisco Houston, Burl Ives, Agnes Sis Cunningham and Leadbelly joined them and participated in various events as members of the Almanac Singers; therefore, their names are mentioned throughout the thesis as well. However, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger remain as the primary point of focus in not only Chapter II but also the next chapters to come.

The next two chapters directly take the war years as their setting. Chapter III is mainly based on the band's anti-war stance towards World War II, following the first political swing that took place in 1939. In the heart of this chapter's discussions, the band's first two albums, *Songs for John Doe* and *Talking Union*, are placed. *Songs for John Doe*, released in April 1941, consisted of seven songs, all of which contained a strong anti-war tone.²³ A month later, their second album, *Talking Union*, was released. This album included songs that praised unionism and did not have a directly war-related content. However, the band's political stance was so firm

²¹ Briley, "Woody Sez," 32; Cray, *Ramblin' Man*, 215.

²² Agnes "Sis" Cunningham and Gordon Friesen, *Red Dust and Broadides: A Joint Autobiography* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 209.

²³ Doris Willens, *Lonesome Traveler: The Life of Lee Hays* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 67.

and widely known that the album was more popular among “bohemian and communist circles than in the ranks of labor.”²⁴ Although the songs they produced in this period are not limited to these two albums, due to their heavily political content, these songs form the basis of their anti-war stance after World War II broke out. The content of all these songs both describe the band’s and its members’ perception of the war and represent their vision of the world.

Following the analysis of the anti-war period of the Almanac Singers, the study continues with their almost diametrically opposed pro-war period in Chapter IV. This chapter discusses how Guthrie and Seeger’s “flip-flop” took place. After the news of Nazis invading the Soviet Union, the Communist Party embraced a new approach, and so did the Almanac Singers. When the three critical incidents of 1941 for the course of the war, the invasion of the Soviet Union in June, the sinking of the American ship USS Reuben James in October, and the attack on Pearl Harbor in December, are taken into consideration altogether, it may seem that there is nothing eerie with the band’s change of stance in their February 1942 album *Dear Mr. President*. However, this chapter argues that the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union played a more significant role in their political turn than the other two aforementioned incidents. In addition to their songs, biographical and autobiographical works related to the members of the band are of great help to shed light on the process of their political transformation.

In the last chapter, Chapter V, this study is concluded with a general overview of the arguments discussed in the previous chapters. Moreover, the limitations and challenges during the research are mentioned.

²⁴ Pete Seeger, “Whatever Happened to Singing in the Unions,” *Sing Out!* (May 1965), 29.

1.2 Historiography and Sources

A lot has been written on how much importance music has on creating a new culture or transforming the existing culture of various peoples. Besides, it is necessary to understand the relationship between politics and music to see the potential of music to directly or indirectly influence the political evolution of any society. American folk music, in the context of this study, is the example of such potential. Therefore, while studying on the past-to-present literature for this thesis, the scope was kept as wide as possible because the relation of music and politics can tell us so much no matter whether the case being told is specifically on American music, folk music, World War II, or something completely different.

Political scientist and academic Courtney Brown tells his readers how music can influence people and both national and international politics by presenting examples from the past in his work *Politics in Music: Music and Political Transformation from Beethoven to Hip-Hop*. He begins his work by suggesting that music is filled with political content and that it is not hidden somewhere underneath, but it is right on the surface of it. He, therefore, defines music as a conveyor of political messages, and any casual listener of any genre of music can easily understand and observe this fact.²⁵ In the parts where he mentions the role of music in the nation-building process, the importance of folk music is emphasized. The book does not focus on the World War II era specifically but instead gives more examples from World War I, which helps to understand the roots of the characteristics of protest folk music in the

²⁵ Courtney Brown, *Politics in Music: Music and Political Transformation from Beethoven to Hip-Hop* (Atlanta: Farsight Press, 2008), 1-2.

history of the United States better and the fact that the majority of the most prominent American folk musicians at the time of World War I had an anti-war stance may indicate that the anti-war position that the Almanac Singers embraced when World War II broke out was not specific to their world views, but it was because of the anti-war stance being a significant characteristic feature for American folk musicians throughout its history.

Another work that argues the relation of music and politics, but this time more specifically in the context of World War I and World War II, is Brian Murdoch's *Fighting Songs and Warring Words: Popular Lyrics of Two World Wars*. The book focuses on the songs written during both great wars in separate chapters. In the sections where Murdoch focuses on World War II, he mentions how music is used for war aims in the Axis countries as well, and thus argues music has always been used as a tool of propaganda everywhere else in the world as well as in the United States.²⁶

There is a considerable amount of literature on the music of World War II. One common point that brings these works together is that they focus more on the songs that praised the war efforts, helped the public and the soldiers to keep their motivations strong and their hopes up, while there is not much remark on musicians and songs that opposed the war. This is nothing but another reason why the anti-war period of the Almanac Singers is worth looking at. *Sounds of War: Music in the United States during World War II*, written by Annegret Fauser, answers such questions as what kind of role music had in the American experience of World War

²⁶ Brian Murdoch, *Fighting Songs and Warring Words: Popular Lyrics of Two World Wars* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 174.

II, how composers responded to the demands coming from the people, and how musicians contributed to the war efforts. The book spares a good deal of space to the use of music as morale and propaganda operations. By presenting examples from specific cases and individuals, Fauser explains how “musical diplomacy” was used to get into the hearts and minds of the people of Allied countries.²⁷

Music of the World War II Era, written by William Young and Nancy Young, similarly begins with the government-sanctioned search for war-themed songs that would help increase the public support for the war. The authors, however, argue that this effort of the governmental offices was not so necessary or meaningful because the rise of songs with patriotic content was already the result of a naturally growing process. In his book titled *The Songs that Fought the War: Popular Music and the Home Front*, John Bush Jones draws attention to the fact that not only famous figures of the time contributed to this process of musical patriotism, but there were numerous amateurs, a lot of men, women and even children that intended to express their patriotism through their music at the time. Furthermore, the book spares a chapter solely on the non-interventionism-themed songs at the time and their reasonings.

In his book, *The Music of World War II: War Songs and Their Stories*, Sheldon Wrinkler, recalls that at school, during World War II, students were required to learn and memorize the lyrics of some war-related songs. He goes on to say that even if they were not forced to it, they would still memorize them because of the perpetual

²⁷ Annegret Fauser, *Sounds of War: Music in the United States during World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

playing of war songs on radios and elsewhere in their daily lives.²⁸ Thus, some of the most memorable pieces of popular music of the previous century were created during World War II because the demand and interest were quite high. Wrinkler begins his book by remarking some of the prewar popular songs created in the United States in the period between the inception of the war and the American entry into it. Here there is a mention of songs about the war that was going on in Europe as well as some songs that had an anti-war content.

Benjamin Filene's *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* analyzes the relation between the folk musicians at the time of World War II and the federal government. He tells the story of folksingers being marginalized in the music industry and society. According to Filene, Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency (at least some periods of it) was one of the rare times in the history of the United States when folk musicians and the political power-holders were on good terms. Therefore, the war efforts were supported unanimously by the folk musicians of the time after Pearl Harbor.²⁹ The book does not only focus on the story of the Almanac Singers, but it spares an adequate space to mention several other prominent folk music figures of the era such as Alan Lomax, Lead Belly, Muddy Waters, and Willie Dixon and analyze their songs and stories before and during the World War II.

In *My Song is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism and the Politics of Culture*, Robbie Lieberman takes the period between 1930 and 1950 as the primary point of focus to tell the reader about the significance of music in social and

²⁸ Sheldon Wrinkler, *The Music of World War II: War Songs and Their Stories* (Hoosick Falls: Merriam Press, 2019), 8.

²⁹ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 136-137.

political life in the United States. As a reference to the book's title, Woody Guthrie, seeing his guitar as a machine that kills fascists, and Pete Seeger, seeing his banjo as a machine that surrounds hate and forces it to surrender, are two great examples of singers who use their songs as a weapon. This reference actually seems enough to explain why the World War II years in the book are remarked with a particular focus on the case of the Almanac Singers. The book begins with an explanation of the ties between the communist ideology and folksingers. Lieberman suggests that at the time, American communists were considered as "mechanical pawns of the Soviet foreign policy" because their attitudes and ideas towards fascism and the course of the war could change so easily, which is one of the key points of this thesis as well.³⁰

The claim that American communists were in close ties with the Moscow administration brings us to David Caute's *The Fellow Travellers: Intellectual Friends of Communism*, which offers an extensive analysis of the term fellow traveler by going back to its origins and explaining its use in the contemporary times. In response to Orwell's definition of fellow travelers as people who wanted to be anti-fascist without being anti-totalitarian, Caute claims that fellow travelers in fact wanted to be anti-totalitarian without being anti-communist. Moreover, he criticizes fellow travelers for two primary reasons. First of all, he touches upon the subject of "moral cowardice" and argues they wanted to remain clean of accusations despite supporting the communist ideology. Secondly, he argues that such fellow travelers do enjoy the blessings of the free world while romanticizing the communist cause, and they would not actually want to live in countries under communist rule.

³⁰ Robbie Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 6-8.

Therefore, he accuses them of being hypocrites and racists at the same time.³¹

Although Caute does not mention any American folk musician in his book as a fellow traveler, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger were associated with this term on several other occasions by other writers.

In addition to these works analyzing the relation between music, politics and society, and the power of songs on shaping the public opinion in numerous different contexts, there are various biographical and autobiographical works that are of critical importance for this thesis. *Pete Seeger: In His Own Words* is the first of such autobiographical works. The book was written by Pete Seeger himself in collaboration with Rob Rosenthal and Sam Rosenthal. It contains a vast collection of Seeger's notes, letters, published articles, and other literary works, many of which were not published anywhere else prior to this book. Pete Seeger himself states in the beginning of the book that "Whatever insights I've had and whatever mistakes I've made in my long life are now displayed. The inconsistencies, the contradictions are all here."³² Both the pieces that Seeger wrote many years ago and the ones that he added in the more recent years give the reader an insight into his beliefs, his thoughts, and his motivations for what he did throughout his life, including the "inconsistencies and contradictions" that this thesis puts a great emphasis on.

In *The Incomplete Folksinger*, Seeger shares his thoughts and what he had on his mind at specific moments in his past. While sharing the accounts of his past, with the help of the informal language he embraces throughout the book, he keeps it honest

³¹ David Caute, *The Fellow Travellers: Intellectual Friends of Communism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 3-6.

³² Pete Seeger, preface to *Pete Seeger in His Own Words* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), xi.

with the readers even if it sometimes requires criticizing himself quite harshly. The third autobiographical work of Seeger, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?* provides its readers with Seeger's personal comments and thoughts on more than two hundred of his songs. Since the book has a structure in which there are separate titles for each song he gives information about, only the songs which belong to the times when he was a member of the Almanac Singers can be benefited from. Nevertheless, his comments varying from the songwriting processes to performing, from social activism to his observations and anecdotes about specific events in the past, have immense value for this study.³³

How Can I Keep From Singing: Pete Seeger by David King Dunaway is a biographical work that focuses on Pete Seeger's life and musical career. The book is divided into several chapters, and each chapter is titled with a popular Pete Seeger song. Throughout each chapter, the reader is offered the story and background of the very song that gave the chapter its name. The information offered to the reader is not limited to the stories of the songs, but it spares a serious amount of background information and lots of stories from Seeger's life. Even though the book gives the reader an understanding of Seeger's view of life and ideology, it does not cover a lot about the World War II era specifically. Allan M. Winkler's biographical work on Seeger, *To Everything There is a Season: Pete Seeger and the Power of Song*, makes up for this gap and provides the reader with an extensive insight to his political positioning during the war, and before the war.³⁴

³³ Pete Seeger, *The Incomplete Folksinger* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992); Pete Seeger, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone: A Singalong Memoir* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

³⁴ David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing: Pete Seeger* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981).

The life of Woody Guthrie has been studied by several authors as well. Joe Klein's biographical work *Woody Guthrie: A Life* and Allan Jackson's biographical work *Prophet Singer: The Voice and Vision of Woody Guthrie* have different points of view, especially when it comes to the World War II years in Guthrie's life. Jackson refuses the claims that Guthrie's view towards the war changed without any foundation. He argues that Guthrie was misunderstood and that he was a humanitarian more than a soldier, and that he kept his emotions more valuable than his ideology. That is why he refused to fight the war in the first place but changed his mind later because he could not stand seeing people all over the world being victims of the Nazi terror.³⁵ This constitutes the greatest counterargument of this study, which suggests an honorable fellow-travelership and a sane, justifiable political positioning rather than being a puppet of Moscow. Klein, on the other hand, spares a good deal of space in his book for Guthrie's efforts to justify and keep up with the moves of the Soviet Union throughout the war. For instance, he remarks how Guthrie and his close circle consoled each other when the Soviet Union signed the non-aggression pact with the Germans by suggesting that the Soviet Union had been left alone by the French and the British in their honorable fight against fascism, and that they had no other option other than signing the non-aggression treaty.³⁶

The Life, Music and Thought of Woody Guthrie by John S. Partington focuses more on Woody Guthrie's influence on the next generation of folksingers to come.

Partington suggests that Woody Guthrie's use of music as a way of conveying his

³⁵ Mark Allan Jackson, *Prophet Singer: The Voice and Vision of Woody Guthrie* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2008), 205.

³⁶ Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 129.

political and social protest towards the policy-makers paved a new way for all other protest folksingers in the coming decades. The book does not necessarily focus on the World War II era, but this kind of personal approach to Guthrie helps to understand him better. *Woody Guthrie L.A. 1937 to 1941*, edited by Darryl Holter and William Deverell, is a compilation of twelve essays focusing on the years Guthrie spent in Los Angeles, and how this relatively short period of time actually changed his music, politics, and legacy. Enriched with the supply of primary sources such as newspaper columns and song lyrics belonging to that four-year period, the book provides an insight to pre-World War II Woody Guthrie. *Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie*, another biographical work of Guthrie, was written by Ed Cray, the first biographer to be granted access to the Woody Guthrie Archive. This book, too, focuses more on Guthrie's musical performance and protest stance before World War II, and the writer even claims that Guthrie's performance had already started to deteriorate in the World War II years in terms of musical values and disciplined meaningful choice of lyrics.

In addition to these biographical works, Woody Guthrie has a partially fictionalized autobiographical work, *Bound for Glory*, which was published for the first time in 1943. Since Guthrie was in his early thirties when it was published, a large amount of the book consists of his childhood and younger times. The book helps to understand the background story of Guthrie and the environment in which he grew up since it is also a portrayal of the United States in the Great Depression years. Moreover, the title gives us an insight of Guthrie's view of politics. He sees the efforts of the United States and the Soviet Union in the war as a patriotic campaign

against the rising threat of fascism and claims that the people of both nations were “bound for glory” in order to succeed in this tough challenge.³⁷

Last but not least, there are two compilations on Woody Guthrie that provided this study with numerous primary sources on him during the research. The first one is *Woody Sez*, a collection of his daily columns written under the same title for the *People's World* magazine from May 1939 until January 1940. These columns were brought together and published in 1975. Not all the columns every day had political content, but after all, those were the wartimes. Hence, the ones which did have more political content carry significant value in order to understand Guthrie's point of view and his perception of the war. The other one is *Woody's Road: Woody Guthrie's Letters Home, Drawings, Photos, and Other Unburied Treasures*, which is another collection of numerous primary sources on Woody Guthrie, as the title itself suggests. Authors of the book, Mary Jo Guthrie Edgmon (Woody Guthrie's sister) and Guy Logsdon, present the reader quite an extensive depiction of Guthrie's life from his childhood until his unfortunate suffering from the Huntington's disease. Particularly the chapter titled “Woody's Patriotism” offers an honest insight into Guthrie's political views during World War II, and his disputed political motivations are supported with various first-hand sources belonging to those years.³⁸

Biographical works on major folksingers of this era are not limited to Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie. Lives of other members of the Almanac Singers have also been studied before in various biographical works. *Lonesome Traveler: The Life of Lee*

³⁷ Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* (New York: Dutton, 1943); Briley, “Woody Sez” 32.

³⁸ Woody Guthrie, *Woody Sez* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1975); Mary Jo Guthrie Edgmon and Guy Logsdon, *Woody's Road: Woody Guthrie's Letters Home, Drawings, Photos, and Other Unburied Treasures* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

Hays, written by Doris Willens, tells the story of Hays, who was together with Pete Seeger not only in the Almanacs but also in the Weavers³⁹ in the coming years. The book tells the reader about Hays' Southern background and how he grew up to become a leftist. Willens then continues to share Hays' journey with the readers as he stood together with Pete Seeger during the wartimes as members of the Almanac Singers, and then on the witch-hunt days of the early Fifties. *Sing Out, Warning! Sing Out, Love!: The Writings of Lee Hays* is a compilation of his published works and unpublished memoirs brought together by Robert S. Koppelman. This book also contributes to understanding Hays' lifelong political stance greatly. The introduction chapter is written by Koppelman, which takes up almost a quarter of the entire book and shares the editor's perspective on Hays, while the rest of the book is comprised of the folksinger's own written pieces.⁴⁰

Bess Lomax Hawes, who later joined the base quartet and became a member of the Almanac Singers, has an autobiographical work titled *Sing It Pretty: A Memoir*, which tells her eighty-eight-year-long story from her early childhood until the very recent times. Born into a family of musicians and music producers, Bess Lomax Hawes embraced folk music as a part of her personality from her early ages onwards. The book consists of accounts of Hawes as a member of the Almanac Singers during World War II, then as a producer of American folk culture films, and finally as an

³⁹ Successor of the Almanac Singers, formed in 1948 by Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, Fred Hellerman and Ronnie Gilbert.

⁴⁰ Robert S. Koppelman, ed., *Sing Out, Warning! Sing Out, Love!: The Writings of Lee Hays* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010).

author of several academic works on the field of musicology and anthropology later on.⁴¹

Agnes Sis Cunningham, another member of the Almanacs, and her husband Gordon Friesen has an autobiographical work published in 1999 under the title *Red Dust and Broadsides: A Joint Autobiography*. In this book, Friesen and Cunningham, both known to be leftist social activists, share numerous accounts of their personal and political journeys. When the two met and got married, they both had already been committed to the political causes they believed in, but the only difference was their fields. Sis Cunningham was a folk musician, while Gordon Friesen was working as a journalist. The time of World War II, when Sis Cunningham sang along the Almanac Singers as a member of the band, was just a beginning in their long path of political and social activism. The majority of the book's content focuses on events and accounts taking place after World War II; however, the section spared for World War II years and Cunningham as a member of the Almanac Singers will be benefited from in this study.⁴²

As seen above, the current literature offers a great deal of works that focus on the relation between music, ideology, and politics during World War II. However, in the context of World War II and the United States, the majority of such works focus more on the songs that support the presence of the United States in the war and praise its war efforts in every field, rather than songs that oppose the war. Sheldon Wrinkler, author of *The Music of World War II: War Songs and Their Stories*, also confirms this by stating: "In all the lectures I have presented and the panels I have

⁴¹ Bess Lomax Hawes, *Sing It Pretty: A Memoir* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

⁴² Cunningham and Friesen, *Red Dust*.

been a part of, I have never been asked about anti-war songs. I checked all of my books [on World War II] and found nothing on anti-war sentiment,” in his response to an email that asked him about this very issue. He expresses his opinion by saying that all opposition to the war was frowned upon, with patriotism at an all-time high.⁴³ That is the reason why biographical and autobiographical works on the members of the band, and the songs themselves created by the Almanac Singers at the time play a guiding role in this thesis.

1.3 Background

It should not come as a surprise that there has been quite a debate on the definition of the word “folk,” let alone the definition and content of “folk music.” Although it sounds like such a simple and common word, meanings ascribed to such simple words often tend to cause a confliction. For some, “folk” just means “people” in a general sense. While some define “folk” as an economic term and specifically relate it to the agricultural, undereducated classes of the society, some others argue that in modern and civilized societies there is no such thing as “folk” and thus no “folk music” either. John Greenway, a noted English scholar who focused closely on American folk songs of protest throughout his academic career, agreed to a certain extent with those who defended there was no longer a group of people in modern communities that could be called “folk.” However, he went on to suggest that after the existence of “the old agricultural folk” came to an end, “folk” did not cease to

⁴³ “Soldiers and Swingsters, Brothers in Arms: Why Was There No Anti-War Swing?” The Syncopated Times, accessed February 22, 2020. <https://syncopatedtimes.com/soldiers-and-swingsters-brothers-in-arms-why-was-there-no-anti-war-swing>.

exist but evolved into something else. Out of this transformation, a new and more industrialized folk flourished.⁴⁴

Just like the term “folk” itself, it is not easy to come up with a definition of “folk music” on which everyone can agree either. In its most basic sense, it is the music of the common folk. Instead of going into detailed descriptions, Slobin simply states “we know it when we hear it” to define folk music.⁴⁵ For many other scholars, though, folk music needs way more thorough definitions and specifications. Since it is supposed to be a reflection of the problems, expectations and perspectives of the common folk, folk music is, as a genre, expected to consist of simple musical elements. In the American context, for example, folk music has historically been associated with the mountain people of the Appalachia, and the African American blues singers, living a rather simpler life. Accordingly, the folk songs themselves are usually expected to be simple enough for the average folk to memorize, sing along, and even play with their own instruments. Therefore, many folk songs that carry these qualities go through several changes of lyrics or tunes in time.⁴⁶

The simplicity that is attributed to folk music as its primary feature brings limitations to the genre in terms of the instruments used in songs as well. Traditionally in American folk music, acoustic string instruments such as guitars, fiddles, banjos and mandolins have always been the absolute first choices.⁴⁷ At times, the limitations created in people’s minds about folk music were so strict that even Pete Seeger’s

⁴⁴ John Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), 9.

⁴⁵ Slobin, *Folk Music*, 1-2.

⁴⁶ Young and Young, *Music of the World War II Era*, 168.

⁴⁷ Phil Hood, introduction to *Artists of American Folk Music* (New York: GPI Publications, 1986), 4.

signature five-string banjo, which was essentially nothing more than just another variation of the classical banjo with four strings, faced criticism. Later on, even a progressive like Pete Seeger himself would carry on this wave of conservatism when it comes to the essentials of the genre. He was rumored to be so frustrated with the newly emerging sub-genre of folk-rock, one of whose pioneers was Bob Dylan, that in 1965, during Dylan's performance at the Newport Folk Festival, he attempted to pull the plug of his electrified set. When asked about that moment, he would later say "I was so furious that the sound was so distorted you could not understand a word that he was singing."⁴⁸

Another qualification that is widely attributed to folk songs is the necessity that they should be passed on by word of mouth from one singer to another for ages. From this point of view, one cannot simply sit down in his or her desk and write a folk song, nor can a person learn a folk song from a book or a printed piece of paper. According to those who claim this, if a song has not gone through this process of oral tradition for quite some time, it would not be correct to call it a "folk song." Moreover, this very process would supposedly lead to the song's losing of its origins, and at the end of a fair amount of time no one would know the song's writer or composer. Only then could the song really belong to the folk and become a true "folk song."⁴⁹

In contrast to these numerous claims on what folk music is and is not, some have argued that it should not be limited to such specific frames because folk music is essentially the music of people. American blues singer Big Bill Broonzy once said,

⁴⁸ Pete Seeger, interview by Amy Goodman. *Democracy Now!* PBS, Video, 2004, https://www.democracynow.org/2015/7/24/video_pete_seeger.

⁴⁹ Robert Winslow Gordon, *Folk Songs of America* (New York: National Service Bureau Publications, 1938), 3; Louise Pound, *American Ballads and Songs* (New York: Kessinger Publishing, 1922), xiii.

“I guess all songs is folk songs ‘cause I never heard no horse sing ‘em.”⁵⁰ Benjamin Filene, in the beginning of his book *Romancing the Folk*, states that he intentionally avoids using the term folk music throughout the book in order to get away from all the disputes on what is folk music and what is non-folk music. Instead, he prefers the term “vernacular music” and defines it loosely by only stating that vernacular songs should sound familiar and easily embraceable to ordinary people, and it should require as little as possible formal training and material resources to produce such songs.⁵¹ The issue of familiarity and easy accessibility is mentioned by various other scholars and folksingers as well. Directness and simplicity are the two key elements that lie beneath the timeless appeal of folk music, argues Phil Hood.⁵²

The function of folk music is a whole different topic of dispute. Philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder once said that every “folk” had its own various forms of expression, and folk music was one of them. Thus, we can conclude that even in the eighteenth century, the intelligentsia was aware that folk music actually held the power to shape societies rather than only reflecting the folk’s problems to the folks themselves.⁵³ It cannot be denied that songs have traditionally been used to express feelings and thoughts about the issues of the time they were created. It is not unique to American folk music, or folk music at all. Approximately four thousand years ago, Chinese emperors used to send officers to listen and record the songs of the workers building

⁵⁰ Hood, introduction to *Artists of American Folk Music*, 4.

⁵¹ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 4.

⁵² Hood, introduction to *Artists of American Folk Music*, 4.

⁵³ Slobin, *Folk Music*, 53.

the Great Wall to have an idea of the opinions of ordinary men.⁵⁴ It is known that Diggers in England in the seventeenth century created marches and anthems with such themes as egalitarianism and class consciousness. There were some claims that the “Lillibullero” march, composed by Henry Purcell, played a significant role at the time of the Glorious Revolution and thus dethroning of James II.⁵⁵

In the eighteenth century, we can see Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun, who believed in the power of music so much that he once stated, “If a man were permitted to make all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of a nation”⁵⁶ because songs would have enough power to make things right for the communities even if the politicians digressed from the right path. When we come to the nineteenth century, we can start talking about American folk music. Even though Greenway argued that American folk music could be traced back to “the first Colonial broadsides that were sold on the streets of Boston,”⁵⁷ the content of folk music in the United States prior to the nineteenth century had been drowned in racial issues. While Native American folk songs, having been passed on from one generation to another orally for many years, were too local to be defined as “American” folk music, the African American music was intentionally placed in a peculiar position. Songs of African Americans could not be regarded as American folk music since the people who made those songs were not considered as neither American nor folk. Thus, the initial pieces to be

⁵⁴ Betty Wang, “Folksongs as Regulators of Politics,” in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1965), 310.

⁵⁵ David King Dunaway, “Music and Politics in the United States,” *Folk Music Journal* 5, no. 3 (1987): 268.

⁵⁶ George William Thomson Omond, *Fletcher of Saltoun* (Edinburgh: Oliphand, Anderson, and Ferrier, 1897).

⁵⁷ Greenway, preface to *American Folksongs of Protest*.

considered as American folk songs at the time belonged mostly to the rural white Americans.⁵⁸

The first decade of the twentieth century was the time when organized unionism started to rise in the United States for the first time. When the increasing wealth that expanding American industrialization in the aftermath of the Civil War brought was not proportionally passed onto the workers, who actually played the leading role in the process of creating this wealth, there was no way other than organized revolt. The strikes and revolts eventually led to the formation of Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1905. The foundation of the IWW in a way meant the birth of American communism.⁵⁹

As American folk music and labor unions have historically been hand in hand, any argument on labor unions would be incomplete without mentioning the role of folk music. Since its birth, the American labor movement has been quite rich in music. Hence came the first union songs with the emergence of the first organized labor unions.⁶⁰ Joe Hill was one of the most outstanding figures of this period because he was both a folk musician and a labor activist as an active member of the IWW. Hill would later be accused of murder with only little and blurry evidence to support the charges against him, and he would eventually be executed in 1919. Right before his execution, he sent a letter to Big Bill Haywood, one of the founding members of the IWW, that read “I die like a true rebel. Don’t waste any time mourning—

⁵⁸ Slobin, *Folk Music*, 54-56.

⁵⁹ Ralph Chaplin, *Wobbly: The Rough and Tumble Story of an American Radical* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 14.

⁶⁰ Dunaway, “Music and Politics in the United States,” 274.

organize!”⁶¹ His so-called martyrdom left its influence on countless of people’s lives in both labor unionist and folk musician circles, including Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger.⁶²

World War I, as the first remarkable event of the twentieth century on an international scale, was in the highlight of almost all popular American folk songs throughout the second decade of the century. Just like in the case of World War II, there were songs that supported and opposed the war. There are different approaches on where to put war songs that support the war efforts, though. On one hand, they reflect a group of people’s opinions and the ways of thinking at a certain time and this definition falls right into the category of folk music. On the other hand, there has been a claim that folk song, by nature, should have a protest stance. According to this argument, a folk song should “offer resistance to an abstraction of the social order.” A song cannot be considered as a “political folk song” unless it involves an opposition to the present situation. Thus, only the war songs that criticize the politicians who led their nations to these wars, military orders or the social structures that created the war could count as political folk songs. The rest could only be called propaganda songs.⁶³

World War I left behind a spiritually tired American nation. Having had enough of President Wilson’s talk of America’s duty to humanity, the majority of public opinion wanted to break free from world politics and retreat into its shell. The damages of the war still being fresh in people’s minds, a strong wave of isolationism

⁶¹ Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest*, 195.

⁶² Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 45; Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 83.

⁶³ Dunaway, “Music and Politics in the United States,” 269.

swept the nation throughout the 1920s. It almost got to a certain point where people started to show hostility towards anything foreign.⁶⁴ The 1930s started with the isolationist mindset still strong among people. While fascism was on the rise in Europe and another great war was waiting at the door, the defining events of this decade in the United States were the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. Economic struggles and political unrest all around the world made American folk music more and more politicized.

Furthermore, the 1930s was the decade when radio became the largest medium for mass-audience, and it continued to hold this title until the late 1950s. According to the results of a survey in 1945, there was a radio available in approximately 89 percent of American homes all around the country. With radios becoming widespread throughout the country, the sound of folk music started to be heard by more and more people. Moreover, on the contrary of the previous administration of Herbert Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt worked quite hard both in terms of his rhetoric and his actions in order to make the rural whites and minorities of the nation more visible. This endeavor included the incorporation of folk songs as “America’s true musical heritage.”⁶⁵

As a sign of this new approach, the first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt personally attended the White Top Folk Festival in Virginia in 1933. The approval of folk music by Roosevelts certainly contributed to the genre’s overall popularity throughout the country. Even the number of people attending to the festival that year is a sufficient

⁶⁴ Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2010), 94; Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity*, 205.

⁶⁵ Young and Young, *Music of the World War II Era*, 105; Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 134.

indication of this change. While the festival used to draw around four thousand people every year, this number rose fivefold the year Mrs. Roosevelt attended.⁶⁶

This intimacy commenced between the federal government and the folksingers interestingly coincided with the genre's gaining popularity among the communist circles as well. With the rise of labor unionism, several folk songs with political content were already popular among Wobblies (members of the Industrial Workers of the World) or other socialist fractions. In 1931, the Workers Music League, the originator of which was nobody but Charles Seeger (Pete Seeger's father), was founded and several prestigious American folksingers of the day became members of the organization. However, the real deal in terms of folk music's rise in popularity was the reflection of the Comintern's call for an international Popular Front in the United States from 1935 onwards, which encouraged Americans all over the country to come together and embrace their cultural richness, American folk music gained even more fame. In 1936, American Music League was founded with a purpose of collecting and studying on American folk songs.⁶⁷

At the end of a decade already full of economic and political bottlenecks, the country's number one agenda as of 1939 was, needless to say, World War II, which brings us to this very study. As it can clearly be seen, folk music has been the sound of the discontented, unsatisfied and most of the time oppressed people constituting "the broad base of the social and economic pyramid" from its earliest periods to the

⁶⁶ David E. Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 191-193.

⁶⁷ Dick Weissman, *Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution: Music and Social Change in America* (London: Buckbeat, 2010), 137; Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 70.

most contemporary times.⁶⁸ John Steinbeck explained this by stating “. . . it has always been lightly thought that singing people are happy people. Nothing could be more untrue. The greatest and most enduring songs are wrung from unhappy people.”⁶⁹

To some people, such features of American folk music as being easily accessible and simple may mean that it does not have any musical or contextual depth. It may mistakenly be thought that the sole purpose of folk music is to entertain ordinary people. However, the lyrics of these folk songs have the utter responsibility of carrying the political views of their writers and singers. Alan Lomax argues, “songs act as historical indicators.” After all, all aspects of human activity that belong to the past is a field of search for historians, and this includes music as well.⁷⁰

[A folk song] is campfire entertainment and religious sacrament, a call to arms, and a witness against injustice. It is a spiritual legacy and connection from one generation and one age to another. It is love songs, and drinking songs, and wedding songs, and nursery rhymes, and gospel hymns, and funeral laments, and patriotic songs that make a whole country sing with one voice. It is stomps, and field hollers, and dirty blues, and gentle waltzes, and that high and lonesome sound. It is the hardy original species of music, from which all the flashier hybrids are cultivated.⁷¹

In conclusion, folk music has always been an inseparable part of life itself. It was there during the Revolutionary War in forms of anthems and marches encouraging American freedom fighters against the British Empire. Almost a hundred years later, it was there during the Civil War. Folk songs were the sound of abolitionists who reflected their dissatisfaction with slavery to their songs. In the late nineteenth

⁶⁸ Greenway, preface to *American Folksongs of Protest*.

⁶⁹ John Steinbeck, foreword to *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, by Alan Lomax, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger (Nebraska: Bison Books, 2012).

⁷⁰ Alan Lomax, “Folk Song Style,” *American Anthropologist* 61 (1959): 937-938.

⁷¹ Hood, introduction to *Artists of American Folk Music*, 4.

century, when the ruthless truth was revealed that the American Dream offered to newcomers was nothing like the actual conditions of life, folk music was there on the lips of those discontented masses. When the laborers got together and organized for the first time to stand against their employers, folk music was an essential part of their resistance. When the Great War broke out, folk musicians were there to reflect the public opinion. Some of them opposed the war, while many of them supported fully. Starting in 1929, as the United States went through its hardest economic crisis, folk singers were there, experiencing all the adversities first-hand and making music at the same time. When even a greater war broke out in 1939, folksingers continued to play an important role in both reflecting and shaping public opinion with their songs.⁷²

The folk musicians of the time continued with this self-assigned duty in the coming decades as well. Folk music never disappeared, and those folk musicians never gave up from carrying out their responsibilities as the true sound of “folk.” For all these reasons, as Jewish-American songwriter and composer Irving Berlin once stated, the relationship between history and music is quite intertwined, and thus “songs make history; history makes songs.”⁷³

⁷² Dunaway, “Music and Politics in the United States.” 275-277.

⁷³ Jones, *The Songs That Fought the War*, 1.

CHAPTER II

BEFORE THE WAR CAME

“Why did the left have a powerful, indeed an unprecedented impact on US culture in the 1930s?” Michael Denning asks this question to which he later presents his own answer. He argues that it was because the left was not perceived solely as a political stance but a social-democratic movement at the time. This movement was able to gather various different ideologies around itself as the enemies were common even though the ideals and methods varied. This overarching movement was internationally called the Popular Front, which was formally declared in 1935, but its footsteps began to be heard in the beginning of the decade. The influence of the Popular Front on American politics and overall culture was so huge that the Thirties, as a spirit, did not actually end on December 31, 1939 but stretched into the first half of the Forties.⁷⁴

Therefore, the main setting of this chapter is the 1930s, the decade that is marked with many noteworthy events in both national and international arenas such as the Great Depression, New Deal, Dust Bowl, Spanish Civil War, Hitler’s coming to

⁷⁴ Michael Denning, introduction to *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), xvii.

power in Germany, the rising of fascism in Europe, the emergence of the Popular Front, and in the context of the United States specifically, rise of the leftist ideology. After an overall depiction of the United States in the Thirties and the increasing sympathy towards leftist politics in the country, namely the Communist Party, the chapter focuses on the politicization processes of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, who are the two key figures of this study because it is significant to have an understanding of how they became the people that they were as members of the Almanac Singers starting from 1941.

The fact that this chapter and the rest of the thesis focus on Guthrie and Seeger more than the Almanac Singers as a whole band can be explained based on two primary reasons. First of all, Guthrie and Seeger are widely considered as the all-time most influential and important figures of American folk music. Hence, they were the leading members of the Almanac Singers, and their ideologies played the largest role on the political stance of the group as well.⁷⁵ Secondly, the Almanac Singers was never a band with consistent group membership. From the moment they were first formed until the very end, several folk musicians at the time used to come and go in and out and performed as a part of the Almanac Singers without being permanent members of the group.⁷⁶ In addition to Guthrie and Seeger, Lee Hays and Millard Lampell were the other two core members of the group. However, the majority of academic debates and studies on American folk music in general or the Almanac Singers specifically usually place Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger rather than Hays and Lampell in the center; consequently, the amount of primary and secondary

⁷⁵ Bent Sørensen, "Almanac Songs and Singers: Protest, Détournement and Incorporation," *American Studies in Scandinavia* 47, no.2 (2015): 36.

⁷⁶ Dick Weissman, *Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution*, 142.

sources is much higher when it comes to Guthrie and Seeger compared to the other members of the band.

The backgrounds of Guthrie and Seeger are entirely different from one another. The reasons that pushed them to meet the communist ideology for the first time and develop sympathy towards it are quite unlike. Therefore, to see the process of politicization of a poor Midwest-born young man who was hit hard by the economic bottleneck that the country was in, and the politicization of the son of a New York-based musicologist family who went to Harvard and later dropped out, is an intriguing journey. And once their paths crossed, together they became the loudest voice of American folk music.

2.1 Dirty Thirties: The Rise of Popular Front

On March 7, 1930, President Herbert Hoover relieved the American nation by stating that “the worst effects of the crash upon employment will have been passed during the next 60 days.” He compared the current situation to previous economic depressions in terms of unemployment rates, and he tried to put the people’s mind at rest by saying that the amount of unemployed individuals in proportion to the number of total employment seemed less than one-half of the unemployment rates during the crash of 1907 and the depression of 1920-21.⁷⁷ Two months later, he took his claim even further and said “I am convinced we have now passed the worst and

⁷⁷ Herbert Hoover, “Statement Regarding Business and Unemployment.” (speech, Washington, DC, March 7, 1930), Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/march-7-1930-statement-regarding-business-and-unemployment>.

with continued unity of effort we shall rapidly recover.”⁷⁸ Soon it was understood that nothing was over; on the contrary, it was just the beginning. It took much longer to recover from the severe effects of the Great Depression because it was not a crisis that came overnight, but it was an inevitable result of several factors that had been accumulating since the previous decade and had come to a point that it was no more possible to untangle this economic knot.⁷⁹

As soon as Franklin D. Roosevelt took over, he immediately launched a series of new programs that provided governmental support for struggling people in different industries. In the essence of these new programs lied a shift from Hoover’s liberal economic policies.⁸⁰ In a period when the image of a powerful central government taking care of its people was this much praised, the rise of communist ideology was not something unexpected. While it used to be “a largely irrelevant and often laughable sect,”⁸¹ in the eyes of an average American, the Communist Party indeed gradually started to gather more followers and sympathizers with the beginning of the Thirties. The Stock Market Crash of 1929 did not only break the American economy, it also damaged the image of American capitalism, whose demise had never been imagined by Americans before. After all, there was no unemployment in the Soviet Union when an ordinary American took a look at the country from

⁷⁸ Herbert Hoover, “Address at Annual Dinner of the Chamber of Commerce of the United States.” (speech, Washington, DC, May 1, 1930), University of Michigan Library Digital Collections, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/ppotpus/4731688.1930.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

⁷⁹ Linda George and Charles George, *The Great Depression* (San Diego: Reference Point Press, 2013), 12.

⁸⁰ Ronald D. Cohen, *Depression Folk: Grassroots Music and Left-Wing Politics in 1930s America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 39.

⁸¹ Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 119.

overseas without knowing what else the people over there lacked.⁸² The Communist International put forward that the current crisis in the United States was yet another reason why a worldwide communist revolution was necessary and that the collapse of capitalism was eventually inevitable at one point.⁸³

When the Great Depression reached to its fifth year in 1934, millions of people were still either unemployed or in need of government welfare, and it was not the only crisis that the country had to deal with. Drought had already been hitting the Midwest for the previous four years. Neither drought nor the blowing dust that came along with it was unfamiliar for the people living on the plains; therefore, it did not surprise anyone in the beginning. However, in time, the dust that was brought over the fertile farms and lands by the dry winds reached to quite an extreme, unprecedented level. The dust was so powerful that it made the drought look like a smaller problem, and soon it became harder and harder even to breathe let alone cultivate the lands.⁸⁴

Woody Guthrie once resembled his experience of the Dust Bowl to biblical stories and said that he saw the dust storms collapsing on towns like the Red Sea closing in on the Israelis.⁸⁵ The head of the Resettlement Administration, Rexford Tugwell, stated that it was “one of the most serious peacetime problems in the nation’s history” after going to the region and seeing the results of the violent dust storms.⁸⁶

⁸² Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 120.

⁸³ Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 3.

⁸⁴ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 12.

⁸⁵ Will Kaufman, *Mapping Woody Guthrie* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 21.

⁸⁶ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 12.

George Borgstrom, a food researcher and an authority on world food problems, defined the years-long practices (of American capitalism) eventually leading to the creation of the Dust Bowl as “one of the three worst ecological blunders in history.”⁸⁷

The reason why capitalism was blamed for the Dust Bowl instead of mother nature was the fact that it was indeed people’s fault to play with the region’s balance by leaving the landscapes naked and defenseless against dry winds. As there was no sod to hold the dust and no naturally grown vegetation to resist the winds, heavy dusty clouds were able to reach the farmers’ lands easily.⁸⁸ The next year, 1935, was considered to be “the blackest year” by the locals. One of the most popular songs of Woody Guthrie, “Dusty Old Dust” was written on April 14, 1935, on the day that later came to be known as the Black Sunday. The sun never shone over the southern plains that day due to thick layers of dust hanging in the air.⁸⁹

A dust storm that strong and destructive had never been seen before. Thus, it made some people in the region fear that the apocalypse had arrived.⁹⁰ The song tells the story of those people saying farewell to their loved ones as if it was the end of the world:

Sweethearts sat in the dark and sparked,
They hugged and kissed in that dusty old dark.
They sighed and cried, hugged and kissed,
Instead of marriage, they talked like this:
Honey... So long, it’s been good to know yuh;
So long, it’s been good to know yuh;

⁸⁷ George Borgstrom, *World Food Resources* (New York: Intext Educational Publishers, 1973), 203.

⁸⁸ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 13.

⁸⁹ Cohen, *Depression Folk*, 89.

⁹⁰ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 16.

So long, it's been good to know yuh;
This dusty old dust is a-gettin' my home,
And I got to be driftin' along.⁹¹

When the Great Depression first started to hit the nation, farmers had seemed to be the least affected group by it. The economy of people living in cities depended solely on their jobs; therefore, it did not take long for millions of people to become unemployed and thus hungry. People living in rural areas, however, had their own food supply and source of income thanks to the farms they owned. It was primarily the Dust Bowl that hit them hardest. As a result, the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl together signaled significant weak points for the United States in terms of both economy and ecology.⁹² And capitalism, as the primary decisive element for what was happening all around the entire country, was the number one suspect to blame.

Thus, a great wave of migration towards California began. In his song “Going Down the Road Feeling Bad,” Woody Guthrie depicts the expectations (or dreams) of the Okies⁹³, by also including himself as a member of this large group. The first-person narrator in the song describes the lands that he tries to reach as places where the water tastes like wine, and the dust storms never blow. He is worried because he is going down the “old dusty road,” but at the same time he is hopeful because he “ain’t gonna be treated this a-way” in the place where he will end up in the West.⁹⁴ This

⁹¹ Woody Guthrie, “Dusty Old Dust,” recorded in 1935, track 2 on *Dust Bowl Ballads, Vol. 2*, Victor Records, 1940.

⁹² William Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1933-1940* (New York, Harper & Row, 1963), 19.

⁹³ The name given to the Dust Bowl migrants because most of them came from the state of Oklahoma and several other nearby states.

⁹⁴ Woody Guthrie, “Going Down the Road Feeling Bad,” track 2 on *Dust Bowl Ballads, Vol. 1*, Victor Records, 1940.

dilemma that the narrator of the song is in reflected the hopes and concerns of hundreds of thousands of Okies.

At the time, there were two common misconceptions about the Okies. Although the name given to them was derived from “Oklahoman,” the Okies did not only consist of Oklahomans because the Dust Bowl affected a much wider area than only the state of Oklahoma. Oklahomans actually constituted approximately one quarter of the total mass migrating westwards. Another faulty perception of the Okies was the presumption that they were all unskilled and uneducated farmers. According to the outcome of interviews conducted with numerous migrants, only twelve percent of them stated they decided to leave their places directly due to “farm failure.” Other groups leaving the plains region with the hopes of starting a new and better life there included blue collared and white collared workers.⁹⁵ This indicates that the dust storms hitting the region and destroying farms are not the only factors to blame for this major demographic upheaval. A huge percentage of people living in the region had already been suffering from the unending cycle of debt that they were in for years, and the Dust Bowl was only the final straw.⁹⁶

The answer to historian Michael Denning’s question on why the left had such a powerful impact on American culture in the 1930s is strongly related to these two crises that remarked the decade for American nation. Although its popularity reached to its peak during the 1930s, the roots of American communist movement can be traced back to 1919, when two separate political parties were founded with the inspiration and encouragement they found in the revolution and then the formation of

⁹⁵ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 49-51.

⁹⁶ Kaufman, *Mapping Woody Guthrie*, 21-22.

the Soviet Union in 1917. The Communist Party of America and the Communist Labor Party, which would soon come together and merge into Communist Party USA, stole a lot of members of the Socialist Party of America, which was already a weak political party, but at least it had been active in politics since 1901.

As opposed to the relatively moderate style of politics that the Socialist Party had embraced, the newly founded communist parties were quite upfront about their goals. To them, the ultimate objective was to take down the government by violent means if necessary, conquer and destroy it only to build an ideal state of their own. Trying to gather supporters and politicking in order to gain seats in the House was not their goal. However, open declaration of such ideals turned out to be incompatible with the values of American people, for whom such principles as democracy, individualism and ownership of personal property were inalienable.⁹⁷

While the majority of the American public remained distant from the communist movement, labor unions kept a rather close relationship with it. The IWW was the organization that first ignited the communist fire in the United States decades ago. The organization successfully associated labor movement with the goal of a communist revolution. Even though they lost much of their power of influence after condemning World War I and facing harsh sanctions coming from the government because of it, IWW left a legacy of strong ties between communist ideology and labor unions.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ John Earl Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace?: American Communism and Anticommunism in the Cold War Era* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 6-7.

⁹⁸ Paul F. Brissenden, *The IWW: A Study of American Syndicalism* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1920), 359.

Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, American communist movement carried on from the point where the Wobblies left off. Many considered the IWW “a singing movement,” and Joe Hill was mainly credited for making it happen. He made numerous songs that touched upon the issues of workers while embracing a humorous yet effective tone. Thus, keeping the labor movement a singing one was something the Communist Party USA wanted to continue. Several years later, Pete Seeger would define their ultimate goal as to build a labor movement, too: “A singing labor movement. . . . [with] hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of union choruses. Just as every church has a choir, why not every union?”⁹⁹

In 1931, the Workers Music League (WML) was founded by members of the Communist Party.¹⁰⁰ Next year, Composers’ Collective was formed by several prominent musicians, songwriters, musicologists and academics. Music was an essential part of the labor movement, and the labor movement was an essential part of the American communist movement. However, the Composers’ Collective took this close relationship between music, labor unions and communist movement one step further. Although it was not officially related to the Communist Party USA, the Collective was the first example of a group of professional musicians openly embracing the communist cause and promoting songs with such political content accordingly.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 133.

¹⁰⁰ Maria Cristina Fava, “The Composers’ Collective of New York, 1932-1936: Bourgeois Modernism for the Proletariat,” *American Music* 34, no. 3 (2016): 311.

¹⁰¹ David K. Dunaway, “Charles Seeger and Carl Sands: The Composers’ Collective Years,” *Ethnomusicology* 24, no.2 (1980): 160.

In his article titled “Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?” historian Eric Foner states that “communists were unable to cut the Gordian knot of the relationship between nationalism and socialism.” The fact that many Americans chose the values of Americanism over the ones of communism in the early years of the Communist Party supports this argument.¹⁰² Therefore, the American communist movement took a different turn in the mid-Thirties, and it started to become Americanized. This shift coincided with the enactment of the Wagner Act, which could be translated as Franklin Roosevelt’s offering an olive branch to labor unions.¹⁰³

Despite still being considered as a marginal ideology by the majority of public, communism was now hand in hand with the American labor movement. Besides, as the Great Depression ruined the lives of more and more people, communism started to look like an alternative answer to those who were seeking one. The understanding of class-consciousness and actions such as protesting and striking for their rights when necessary had become settled practices for the unionists. In September 1934, for instance, the largest strike in the entire American history took place when approximately four hundred thousand workers in the textile industry in several states stopped working until their demands were met.¹⁰⁴ As the labor movement grew stronger, employers sought various ways to discipline union members. Firing them and even creating blacklists for members of labor unions were among popular solutions for employers. The National Labor Relations Act, also known as the

¹⁰² Eric Foner, “Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?” *History Workshop* 17 (1984): 73.

¹⁰³ Caste, *The Fellow-Travelers*, 175.

¹⁰⁴ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xiv.

Wagner Act, was passed in the Congress in July 1935, and it secured the workers' rights to form labor organizations of their own or become members of already existing organizations.¹⁰⁵

In the same month of 1935, the 7th World Congress of the Communist International gathered in Moscow. The head of the Comintern, Georgi Dimitrov officially declared a new policy that reversed the call for class warfare in the previous congress in 1928. It was a call for a broad alliance against the rising threat of fascism all around the world.¹⁰⁶ In the American context, this new policy meant that the communists would get one step closer to President Roosevelt just as he also took a step towards them. Rather than taking down the government and destroying the existing system, the new Popular Front policy urged communists to come together with the socialists, progressives, Democrats, and even liberals. From that point onwards, American communism, and accordingly the American understanding of the Popular Front, praised Americanness, not mass revolution. It celebrated cultural diversity, not a one-nation-state ruling the world.¹⁰⁷

All in all, it was more than a convenience marriage of two politically opposite poles. It was an association that basically made the communists and New Dealers fellow travelers of each other.¹⁰⁸ The Americanization of the communist movement

¹⁰⁵ U.S. Congress, *An Act to Diminish the Causes of Labor Disputes Burdening or Obstructing Interstate and Foreign Commerce, to Create a National Labor Relations Board, and for Other Purposes*, 74th Cong., 1st sess., July 5, 1935, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/74th-congress/session-1/c74s1ch372.pdf>.

¹⁰⁶ Robert Shulman, *The Power of Political Art: The 1930s Literary Left Reconsidered* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 15; Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 120.

¹⁰⁷ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 70.

¹⁰⁸ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 5, 10.

benefited both sides of this story. On one hand, Franklin Roosevelt managed to prevent the spurt of a militant and violent communist movement which -together with the labor unions- could have seriously damaged the government in power, and thus he absorbed it into a Democratic Party coalition. On the other hand, this period turned out to be a great opportunity for the Communist Party to find legitimacy in the eyes of American public. Popular Front communism provided the American nation with the kind of communism they desired by merging patriotism and communism into the same ideology.¹⁰⁹ To strengthen this argument, Earl Browder, the leader of the Communist Party at the time, stated that “Communism is the twentieth century Americanism.” The party Americanized its revolutionary goals as well. Browder argued that if the revolutionary tradition were removed from the country’s history, American patriotism would become an empty hollow.

The revolutionary tradition is the heart of Americanism. . . . We, Communists, claim the revolutionary traditions of Americanism. We are the only ones who consciously continue those traditions and apply them to the problems of today. . . . Americanism, in this revolutionary sense, means to stand in the forefront of human progress.¹¹⁰

Prominent members of the party repeatedly used the influential figures of American history such as Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, and Abraham Lincoln. They resembled the Declaration of Independence to Communist Manifesto, and the struggles of Lenin and Stalin to the struggle of American Founding Fathers.¹¹¹ This affinity between American nationalism and communism brought about the celebration of folk music as America’s true voice. Historian Robbie Lieberman

¹⁰⁹ Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Are You On?: The American Communist Party during the Second World War* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Foner, “Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?”, 73.

¹¹⁰ Earl Browder, “Who are the Americans?” *New Masses*, June 25, 1935.

¹¹¹ Earl Browder, *What is Communism?* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1936), 19.

argued that the identification of folk music with leftist politics, or communism to be more specific, was the “most important and lasting effect” of the Popular Front.

“Folk song, more than any other cultural form, expressed and reaffirmed the Popular Front spirit. It was simple and direct; it invited mass participation; it expressed the concerns of the common person,” he said.¹¹²

The Popular Front’s reflections could be seen in most of the artistic products of the time in the fields of literature, cinema, photography, and also in fields other than art such as academia and journalism. However, none of these fields was a clearer example of this social and political unity than the field of folk music. In 1936, American Music League was formed as a Popular Front organization, and it defined its primary goal as “to collect, study and popularize American folk music and its traditions.”¹¹³ This new approach to folk music did not only bring folk musicians into prominence, but it got President Roosevelt closer to the genre as well. Between the years 1934 and 1941, a total of nine folk music concerts took place in the White House for the Roosevelt family. Although this number was still so much fewer than the classical music concerts and opera performances sponsored by the President, it was still an indication of the good terms they were on. Moreover, the Roosevelt administration funded agencies such as the Federal Music Project and the Library of Congress’s Archive of American Folk Song in order to find and work on traditional folk, blues, and worker songs.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 49.

¹¹³ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 70.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 135-136.

The fact that the fascist ideology gathered more and more power in Europe alarmed American communists to take action against it as it would eventually pose a risk for the Soviet Union. It was no secret that Hitler disliked communists, and he indeed got hundreds of thousands of them arrested in Germany. Exile started to seem like the only way to survive from the ruthless Nazi practices.¹¹⁵ On the other hand, fascism appeared to be a worse enemy for non-communist Americans, too, when compared to the ideology of communism. While communists had a relatively peaceful stance at the time, Nazis openly took pride of their country's violence and militarism. While communists were at least dreaming of an ideal, utopian society where each and every individual would have the same rights and prosperity, Hitler and the other fascist rulers in Europe did not hide their anti-Semitic hatred and ultranationalist propagandas.¹¹⁶ As a result, the rising of fascism was about to change all the balances in American society and political structure as the outbreak of World War II approached step by step.

2.2 “A Rusty-Voiced Homer”: Woody Guthrie

Since this thesis focuses on the political stances of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger and the change that they underwent over the course of World War II, it is vital to take a look at the politicization processes of both men. That is why, in this section, we go back in time and start with the childhood and youth of Guthrie and trace his politicization process that eventually made him a legendary figure of American folk music, “the best folk ballad composer whose identity has ever been known”

¹¹⁵ Cate, *The Fellow-Travelers*, 152.

¹¹⁶ Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace?*, 17.

according to his producer Alan Lomax, or as Ellie Siegmeister dared to say: a rusty-voiced Homer.¹¹⁷

Born in 1912 in Oklahoma, Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was the son of a family which were strict followers of the Democratic Party—so strict that they named their son after the presidential nominee of the party for the 1912 Elections. Years later, Woody wrote in his column about his full name, “I sawed off all the fancy work and just left Woody because Woodrow Wilson was too much of a name for a country boy.”¹¹⁸ As a land speculator, his father was already the kind of person that socialists at the time would fight against. Moreover, a believer of white supremacy, Charles Guthrie was said to have taken part in the lynching of Laura Nelson and L. D. Nelson, an African American mother and her son, in 1911. Even though there was no official record to confirm whether he did take part in it or not, the fact that the owner of this claim was Woody Guthrie’s brother, Claude Guthrie, strengthens it. Woody Guthrie himself would also later recall that his father was a supporter and a member of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s.¹¹⁹

Papa was a hard nut on the topic of capitalism, socialism, public ownership, and free enterprise. . . . [He] had tried to teach me to hate and despise, and to insult and fight the Socialists in any spot I got the time and chance.¹²⁰

As a result, his father’s approach and understanding of such issues as race, human rights and economy played a huge role on shaping young Woody Guthrie’s character in the opposite direction. The Guthrie family first lost almost all of their sources of

¹¹⁷ Ellie Siegmeister, *Treasury of American Song* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1943); Greenway, *American Folksongs*, 275.

¹¹⁸ Guthrie, *Woody Sez*, 3.

¹¹⁹ Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 10, 23.

¹²⁰ Woody Guthrie, *Seeds of Man: An Experience Lived and Dreamed* (New York: Pocket Books, 1977), 197.

income due to the collapse of the oil boom, and then Woody's mother passed away when he was only eighteen years old. Then, along with his father, Woody moved to Pampa, Texas, where he got acquainted with the guitar and the harmonica for the first time.¹²¹ At the time, neither music nor politics was in the center of his life. All he needed was to make money, and music was only one of the many ways to do it in addition to sign-painting or appearing on local shows to entertain the crowd.¹²² He married Mary Jennings Guthrie and had a child, but as the effects of the Great Depression intensified along with the unusual dust storms around 1933, he became more and more distant from his family and started to focus more on his music as a means of relief from his stress.¹²³ And then came the "dusty old dust" that changed his life. This is how he described the Dust Bowl in his autobiographical work:

The dust crawled from the north and the banks pushed the farmers off their land. The big flat lakes dried away and left hollow places across the plains full of this hard, dry, cracked, gumbo mud. There isn't a healthier country than West Texas when it wants to be, but when the dust kept whistling down the line blacker and more of it, there was plenty of everything sick, and made, and mean, and worried.¹²⁴

In a region not only hit by the Great Depression but now by the strong dust storms as well, Guthrie had no choice other than joining the great westward migration of the Okies. At first, he started with rather shorter trips. These trips were mostly about going back and forth between the less affected regions in the West and home with the hopes of finding short-term jobs to look after his family. Later on, it gradually became more about just hitting the roads, accompanying the migrants, listening to

¹²¹ Cohen, *Depression Folk*, 88.

¹²² Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 65, 68.

¹²³ Darryl Holter and William Deverell, *Woody Guthrie L. A.* (Santa Monica: Angel City Press, 2015), 17.

¹²⁴ Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, 233.

their stories, getting inspiration from them, making songs about them, and playing those songs for them.¹²⁵ Although he wrote the song “Dusty Old Dust” in 1935 in order to subtly make fun of people saying goodbye to their lovers because they thought those dust storms meant the end of the world, he ended up saying goodbye to his own family, too.

A three- or four-ton beer truck blowed its air brakes and I heard the driver talking, “By God! I thought that looked like you, Woody, Where ya headin’? Amarilla? Hustlin’ signs?” We got off to a jumpy start while he was spitting out his window. “Cal’fornia,” I said. “Hustlin’ outta this dam dust!”¹²⁶

Although later on he said that he did not consider himself as one of the Okies since at the time his father still had some money unlike the heavy majority of migrants whose only chance was to go to the West for a new start, he did go to the West with the hope of finding a job, and he really was penniless despite his counter claims. Therefore, it makes him one of them indeed. His journeys between California and Texas led to a massive change in his personality and political views. He started to look at the society that he was a part of and the conditions they lived in from a wider perspective.

I never did know that the human race was this big before. I never did really know that the fight had been going on so long and so bad. I never had been able to look out over and across the slum section nor a sharecropper farm and connect it up with the owner and the landlord and the guards and the police.¹²⁷

His wife also realized that there was no ending to this back-and-forth travelling of Woody when he did not hesitate to hit the roads back very shortly after coming home to see that she was pregnant. Being on the road widened his world, and with that, a

¹²⁵ Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 78-79.

¹²⁶ Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, 249.

¹²⁷ Woody Guthrie, *American Folksong* (New York: Oak Publications, 1947), 5.

more politically aware Woody Guthrie was born. The tone in his songs slowly shifted towards a darker, more bitter one. In a way, he came to the understanding that using the representations of those migrants in a humorous way did not show the whole picture considering that they had been suffering from a real tragedy.¹²⁸ His song “Dust Bowl Refugee” is one of the early examples of his political transformation.

Yes, we ramble, and we roam
And the highway that's our home
It's a never-ending highway
For a dust bowl refugee.
Yes, we wander, and we work
In your crops and in your fruit,
Like the whirlwinds on the desert
That's the dust bowl refugees.¹²⁹

In addition to resembling the Okies to seasonal temporary workers by saying they are only refugees who wander and work, there is one more reason why he uses this term. At the time, the West was also home to thousands of refugees fleeing from the rising of fascism in Europe. Together with the Okies, these refugees constituted the lowest and most unwelcomed segment of the society. Both groups had run away from their homes; both groups had no hope to go back soon; and both groups were suffering from similar troubles. “Dust Pneumonia Blues” is another example of Guthrie’s political awakening:

Now when I die just lay me on the ground
Let sixteen senators blow my dust around.
Yes, it's dust pneumonia that laid me in my grave
But I'd rather be there than to be a rich man's slave.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 86, 115.

¹²⁹ Woody Guthrie, “Dust Bowl Refugee,” track 3 on *Dust Bowl Ballads, Vol. 2*, Victor Records, 1940.

¹³⁰ Woody Guthrie, “Dust Pneumonia Blues,” track 4 on *Dust Bowl Ballads, Vol. 2*, Victor Records, 1940.

In these lines, his rage against the politicians in higher places can clearly be seen. He believed that there were numerous solutions for the problems of those thousands of people piled up in the West hopelessly looking for jobs, but that the government did not do anything for it. What is more, “rich folks,” as he usually called them, were a part of this problem, too. In his words, “billionaires” were the reason why “hoboes” existed.¹³¹ Furthermore, poverty that the migrants were in was not the only problem in California, but an apparent hostility towards the people coming from the Midwest started as well. Locals of the state of California were in fear of being overrun as the number of the Okies and European refugees exceeded five hundred thousand.¹³² As troubles and problems followed each other and overlapped one another, Woody Guthrie met the communist movement in Los Angeles.¹³³ The story of Joe Hill and the organization of IWW impressed him so much that he started to carry a copy of the *Little Red Songbook*, a compilation of worker songs written by prominent members or supporters of the Wobblies at the time.¹³⁴

I ain't got no home, I'm just a-roaming around.
Just a wandering worker, I go from town to town.
The police make it hard wherever I may go,
And I ain't got no home in this world any more.
Rich man took my home and drove me from my door,
And I ain't got no home in this world any more.¹³⁵

His song “I Ain’t Got No Home” is a summary of his frustration with the constant state of rambling around in search of a home and a job as well as an indication that

¹³¹ Guthrie, *Woody Sez*, 37.

¹³² Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 82.

¹³³ Guy Logsdon, introduction to *Woody Sez*, xv.

¹³⁴ Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 84.

¹³⁵ Woody Guthrie, “I Ain’t Got No Home,” track 5 on *Dust Bowl Ballads, Vol. 2*, Victor Records, 1940.

he started to have a perception of class-consciousness. Overall, an inspection of Guthrie's songs from 1936, when he first got acquainted with the communist movement in Los Angeles, to 1941, when he became a member of the Almanac Singers as an already famous folk music figure, can easily demonstrate what kind of a transformation he went through from being a "hillbilly songwriter" to a more politically aware folk musician. After being contacted and invited to a communist meeting by a correspondent of *People's World*, a west coast communist newspaper, he attended and performed in his first Communist Party rally. Joe Klein defined this event as "love at first sight." Woody Guthrie, who seemed so indifferent to the political stance of the audience before the performance and said, "left wing, chicken wing, it is all the same to me," loved the people that attended the event. And the people loved him as Guthrie was just the stereotypical American Midwesterner that the Popular Front people were looking for to praise. That correspondent of the newspaper, Ed Robbin, became Woody's booking agent after that night, and Guthrie started to perform at countless of Communist Party events.¹³⁶

In 1937, he became the co-host of a radio program on KFVD Radio, *The Woody and Lefty Lou Show*, which included a certain amount of political talk as well as making music. In 1939, he started to write a daily column titled "Woody Sez" on *People's World* that mostly had political content. As Los Angeles was the center where the Popular Front had its biggest cultural influence on the West Coast, Guthrie's political stance was shaped in near-perfect compatibility with theirs.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, he never became an official member of the Communist Party despite hosting a radio program

¹³⁶ Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 123.

¹³⁷ Kaufman, *Mapping Woody Guthrie*, 48-49.

on a channel owned by communists, writing columns on a newspaper owned by communists, and frequently performing at events both organized and attended by communists. On one of his columns, he wrote these lines to explain his relationship with the communist ideology while he was in California:

While I was on the bum in California, I slept in everything but a bed. I ate everything except a square meal and found everything except a home. I made everything except money and lost everything but my debts. I ain't a communist necessarily, but I have been in the Red all my life.¹³⁸

There was no complication in his daily columns. He wrote as simple as any man could understand his points. Sometimes he wrote a paragraph-long commentary on a recent event, or sometimes it was just about himself, questioning his own thoughts, life, and politics. From time to time, a quickly drawn caricature accompanied his paragraphs.

I never stopped to think of it before, but you know—a policeman will just stand there an' let a banker rob a farmer, or a finance man rob a workin' man. But if a farmer robs a banker—you would have a hole dern army of cops out a-shooting at him. Robbery is a chapter in etiquette.¹³⁹

As simple as the example seen above, he expressed his ideas as if he simultaneously learnt about them as well. He did not follow a specific agenda of himself or the one of a larger body. Pete Seeger once called Woody Guthrie as a communist with a lower-case “c” because he was not a member of the party but agreed with its policies and supported it.¹⁴⁰ Seeger’s explanation for why he was not a member of the party was because he was in a constant state of travelling. However, “he was a valued fellow traveler,” he concluded.¹⁴¹ Guthrie’s own statement on not necessarily being a

¹³⁸ Guthrie, *Woody Sez*, 153.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁴⁰ Holter and Deverell, *Woody Guthrie L. A.*, 42.

¹⁴¹ Pete Seeger, “Hobo’s Lullaby,” in *Hard Travelin’: The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie*, eds. Robert Santelli and Emily Davidson (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), 30.

communist but being “in the Red” also confirms this argument. Moreover, he appreciated the Popular Front’s interest in American folk music, so his sympathy towards the ideology partly came from his folk musician identity as well. He wrote on his daily column: “Communists everywhere are the only people I know of that know how to make the right use of our own American folklore, folk culture, folk songs and folk singers. And folks.”¹⁴²

The fact that there was always a certain distance between the Communist Party and Woody Guthrie is mostly explained as a preference of Guthrie. However, several sources indicate that this might be also the party’s choice as well. Historian Guy Logsdon defined Woody Guthrie as “too much of an uncontrollable and unpredictable individualist to fit completely into any particular party structure.”¹⁴³ Rather than having a firm stance, he had half-formed political ideas based on his emotions and past memories. For this reason, he sang, wrote and talked in full independence. If he were a party member, this could cause a trouble for the party from time to time.

2.3 A Harvard-Dropout Yankee: Pete Seeger

One of the many reasons why Seeger-Guthrie duo is worth reading and writing on is that they had such different backgrounds, yet their fate still merged their paths. After arriving at the late Thirties once again in the previous section, we go back in time for one last time and see how young Pete became politicized and got into folk music and

¹⁴² Woody Guthrie, *People’s World*, April 28, 1947.

¹⁴³ Logsdon, introduction to *Woody Sez*, xv.

eventually became the Pete Seeger as the world knew him. Since he was seven years younger than Guthrie and got personally acquainted with folk music only in the mid-Thirties, this section does not include any Pete Seeger songs.

In 1919, Pete was born into a New Yorker, “WASP” family. The Seeger family portrait at the time was something Woody Guthrie would definitely make fun of if he saw it. His mother, Ruth Crawford Seeger, was a composer and folk music collector. She had a special interest in American folk songs for children and wrote a very extensive book on it, arguably the most extensive one until then.¹⁴⁴ Years later, Pete Seeger, blacklisted by the government, would carry on his mother’s studies on folk songs for children and make an album out of it in 1953. His father, Charles Seeger, was a respected musicologist who also made great contributions to the promotion of American folk music. Despite not being a member of the party, he worked in favor of the American communist movement as a member of the Composers’ Collective. He was a firm believer that songs could change societies. As a scholar working on American folk music, he took responsibility in this struggle. He once stated, “the social system is going to hell here. Music might be able to do something about it. Let’s see if we can try. We must try.”¹⁴⁵

In contrast to Woody Guthrie’s relationship with his father and its effects on his character-building process, the relationship of Charles with Pete contributed to his personality in a very positive way. Charles Seeger’s political stance, his approach to music and the responsibility he attributed to it reflected almost exactly on Pete. It was his father who taught Pete that war was hell. He had stood against World War I

¹⁴⁴ Meryl Danziger, *Sing It!: A Biography of Pete Seeger* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2016), 10.

¹⁴⁵ Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 29.

and paid the price of expressing his ideas about it by losing his job at university.¹⁴⁶ Just like his father, Pete believed that songs could change societies so strongly that this was the first thing he wrote when he started writing his autobiography: “Songs have overthrown kings and empires.”¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, just like his father who argued that folk music had to be “revolutionary in content and nationalist in form,”¹⁴⁸ Pete Seeger also carefully kept his leftist political tendencies and patriotic feelings at a balance throughout his life and made songs accordingly.

Young Pete grew up by reading columns from communist newspapers and had something to say at the dinner gatherings of his family starting from very early ages. He started his own subscription to *New Masses* when he was only thirteen years old. In his biography, Dunaway describes him as “a red-diaper baby.”¹⁴⁹ He also took pride of the radical past of his family. In 1957, in a letter that he wrote to Paul Ross, who worked as his lawyer when he was blacklisted in the Fifties, Pete described the Seeger family like this:

As for radicals, the family seems shot through with them, too. In earlier centuries, this took the form of religious protest; Pilgrims, puritans—and I’m proud to see a lot of Quakers around, on both sides of the family. . . . Later, the radicalism took a more political turn. Great-great grandpa Seeger got disgusted with Prussian tyranny, came to America and was an ardent Jeffersonian. Another branch of the family were all fervent abolitionists.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Aaron J. Leonards, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA 1939-1956* (London: Repeater Books, 2020), 17.

¹⁴⁷ Seeger, *The Incomplete Folksinger*, 5.

¹⁴⁸ R. Serge Denisoff, *Great Day Coming: Folk Music and American Left* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1973), 38.

¹⁴⁹ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 5.

¹⁵⁰ Seeger, *Pete Seeger in His Own Words*, 4-5.

In 1932, he started high school at Avon Old Farms, where he never felt that he belonged. While getting education in a place that looked like a British manor from five centuries ago, he did his best to keep up with what was happening outside. His high school years changed his life in two ways, though. First of all, he met Alan Lomax there, who would later introduce him to Woody Guthrie. And another important thing about his high school years was that he got his hands on a banjo for the first time there. Even though both of his parents were professionally related to music, Pete's interest in it had remained at an amateur level until then.¹⁵¹ His primary goal was to become a journalist, and his family did their best for him to get a proper education although they had started to feel the economic effects of the Great Depression as well.

One year before going to university, he met people through his father's connections in the Composers' Collective. As a sixteen-year-old who never had to leave his comfort zone, Pete's horizon was broadened as he met these folklorists who had collected countless of folk songs from all over the country. "Irish miners and railroad workers, Negro cotton farmers from the deep south, and among the most musical were the white settlers, 'backwoodsmen.' . . . I had never heard any of these songs before, 95 percent of Americans hadn't heard these songs."¹⁵² This realization of how much there was to discover about folk music and how much more there was to learn about the folk itself made him more interested in the genre.

Next year, in 1936, Pete Seeger started Harvard with a partial scholarship. As a university student, he kept his distance with politics. "I liked the idea of not actually

¹⁵¹ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 42-43.

¹⁵² Cohen, *Depression Folk*, 61.

being involved myself but observing the action,” he said.¹⁵³ In the very same year, his father, aware of Pete’s growing interest in folk music, took his son to the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville, North Carolina. When he remembered the festival many years later, he said, “I discovered there was some good music in my country which I never heard on the radio.” He admired the music played there not only because it pleased his ears, but also because the content of those songs was so full of meaning. He stated, “The words of the songs had all the meat of life in them. Their humor had a bite, it was not trivial. Their tragedy was real, not sentimental.”¹⁵⁴

Furthermore, he saw the five-string banjo that would later become his life-long signature instrument for the first time during this festival. He recalled that first moment even years later: “I suddenly realized what an extraordinary thing the five-string banjo was.”¹⁵⁵ To summarize, that folk music festival in 1936 marked a turning point in Pete Seeger’s life. From that point on, the banjo, folk music, and naturally politics were in the center of his life. This substantial change in his life coincided with an equally substantial transformation in American political arena: formation of the Popular Front. As he learnt so from his father, Pete Seeger was sensitive on the issue of keeping his ideology and his love for his country on a balance. Therefore, he liked this new understanding of the communist ideology, which advertised itself as the “twentieth-century Americanism.” The relationship among Communism, Americanism, Patriotism, Radicalism, and the association of all

¹⁵³ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 51.

¹⁵⁴ Cray, *Ramblin’ Man*, 177.

¹⁵⁵ Danziger, *Sing It!*, 11.

these terms with the folk music settled perfectly like the pieces of a puzzle in his mind.¹⁵⁶

In 1937, he joined the American Student Union, which was another Popular Front organization that brought communists, socialists and pacifists together as Seeger recalled. Before long, his grades at Harvard deteriorated, and in 1938 he lost his scholarship.¹⁵⁷ He had no choice other than dropping out, and he did not regret it as he already did not like studying Sociology there while he wanted to become a journalist. He still tried to find a job as a journalist, but it was the Great Depression era; there was no luck. For the first time in his life, he saw the harsh face of the economic crisis. In New York, where he had come back with the hopes of finding a job, his path crossed with Alan Lomax once again.

After the festival in Nashville, this was the second turning point in his life before becoming “the” Pete Seeger. Lomax saw Pete’s interest in folk music and told him to learn more about it. In 1939, he invited Pete to work alongside with them as they dug up for folk songs at the Archive of American Folk Songs at the Library of Congress.¹⁵⁸ Pete’s job description required him to listen to hundreds of folk songs every day, week after week, and categorize them. For him, it was more like an experience he would pay to have than a job. This project that got him to earn 15 dollars a week at the time would later include Woody Guthrie as well.¹⁵⁹ After

¹⁵⁶ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 48.

¹⁵⁷ Seeger, *Pete Seeger in His Own Words*, 12; *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*.

¹⁵⁸ Seeger, *The Incomplete Folksinger*, 43.

¹⁵⁹ John Szwed, *The Man Who Recorded the World: A Biography of Alan Lomax* (London: Arrow Books, 2011), 145.

meeting Guthrie, which was the third turning point for young Pete, his life would never be the same again.

2.4 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact: The Fall of Popular Front

The Popular Front turned out to be the golden age of American communism. It was one of the rare moments in the history of communism in which they allied with others and became a stronger unity rather than being split into smaller fractions.

Their coalition with the New Dealers and this new approach that praised American values instead of threatening them brought thousands of new followers and sympathizers. The number members of the Communist Party reached to its peak point in 1939. Although not every union member was a member of the Communist Party, at least they all had sympathy for the movement to a certain extent. Therefore, the increasing number of union membership was also another good sign for the party. Even taking a look at the number of women union members only, which increased threefold from 1929 to 1939, is enough to demonstrate the social change that the United States was going through.¹⁶⁰

Towards the end of the decade, none of the remarking crises of it had come to a satisfying conclusion. The Midwest region was hit by the Dust Bowl, and the West was unhappy because of the Okie newcomers. The effect of the Great Depression could still be felt all around the nation. In addition to all these, the world was getting closer to a global crisis step by step. Japan and China were already in a war. Moreover, the civil war in Spain made more and more countries get involved. In

¹⁶⁰ Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace?*, 12.

response to the open support of Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy for Franco, the Soviet Union provided the Loyalists with Russian aircrafts, ammunition and even troops. The Popular Front called for an American support for the Loyalists in Spain.¹⁶¹ They did not want their country to get directly involved in an armed conflict, but the reason why such a coalition existed to begin with was to come together and fight against Fascism.

While this was the case in Popular Front circles, outside of it, a common fear was on the rise that this way the United States could be sucked into an international crisis. The origin of this concern had come into being immediately after World War I, and the political diversity of the people who called for non-interventionist policies was not any less than the diversity of the Popular Front. In a survey conducted as early as in 1933, approximately 75 percent of twenty thousand American male university students declared that they would not be willing to serve in the army if the United States went into a war. 50 percent of those went a step further and said they still would prefer to stay out of it even if it was their country being invaded.¹⁶² When this survey was completed, there was no signal of a worldwide conflict approaching. The fascist ideology in Europe was not that strong. There were still a few years for the Spanish Civil War and the Chinese-Japanese War to begin. However, none of these changed the perspective of these isolationists on a vast scale. In another survey that was conducted after all of these aforementioned crises broke out (1937), when

¹⁶¹ Cunningham and Friesen, *Red Dust*, 176, 181.

¹⁶² Edmund Stillman, *The American Heritage History of the 20s & 30s* (New York: American Heritage, 1970), 377.

people were asked if it was a mistake for the United States to enter World War I, 71 percent of them answered “Yes.”¹⁶³

President Roosevelt’s “Quarantine the Aggressor” speech, therefore, frightened the isolationists. He openly said that “[t]here is a solidarity and interdependence about the modern world, both technically and morally, which makes it impossible for any nation completely to isolate itself from economic and political upheavals in the rest of the world, especially when such upheavals appear to be spreading and not declining.” This was a direct declaration of the country’s breaking from the isolationist policies embraced after World War I. Towards the end of his speech, Roosevelt called for a worldwide quarantine against the aggressor states, namely the ones under fascist rule, by stating, “it seems to be unfortunately true that the epidemic of world lawlessness is spreading. When an epidemic of physical disease starts to spread, the community approves and joins in a quarantine of the patients in order to protect the health of the community against the spread of the disease.”¹⁶⁴ Even though he concluded the speech by promising the nation that he was determined to keep his country out of the war, and that America hoped for peace, this international call for putting an end to the spread of aggression reminded people of Wilson’s “fight for peace” policy.

The Popular Front people were pleased to hear the president’s determination on this issue, and they demanded him to work on a comprehensive security agreement with

¹⁶³ Frederick Lewis Allen, *Since Yesterday: The Nineteen-Thirties in America, September 3, 1929 – September 3, 1939* (New York: Harper, 1940), 321-322.

¹⁶⁴ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Quarantine Speech.” (speech, Chicago, October 5, 1937), Miller Center of Public Affairs, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/october-5-1937-quarantine-speech>.

other states that embraced the same stance, or at least end the embargo blocking aid to the Spanish Loyalists if not providing them with ammunition. However, they failed to create an effective public opinion that would urge the government to do so. Moreover, what came two years later caught the Popular Front people completely off guard.¹⁶⁵

On August 23, 1939, the *People's World* reported, without comment, the incredible news that a delegation from Nazi Germany had arrived in the Soviet Union to discuss a non-aggression treaty between the two countries. By midafternoon that same day, the announcement of the Hitler-Stalin pact was all over the radio. It sounded, at first, like a capitalist propaganda of the basest sort. The Soviet Union, the bulwark of anti-fascism, had made common cause with Hitler. Even the staunchest of Communists were confused, sickened by the news.¹⁶⁶

The Communist Party had to align with this new situation. The communist media outlets did their best to justify the Soviet Union's agreement with the Nazi Germany. Ed Robbin, correspondent of *People's World*, was one of the unluckiest people on these days as he had to show up in a radio broadcast that very night. He was expected to say something, but there was no official statement from the Communist Party yet. Therefore, on air, he blamed England, France, and the United States. He said that the Soviet Union had been trying to fight against the fascists all alone and making peace with the enemy was its last change to avoid an all-out war because the Western allies had shown no interest in creating a mutual defense treaty with the Soviet Union. Therefore, it was the only way to go for the Soviet Union to protect its people and the future of communism.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 50.

¹⁶⁶ Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 129.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

Two days later, Earl Browder's statement that determined the official stance of the Communist Party appeared on *People's World* under the title of "Pact Sets Peace Example for the World." His explanation for the whole situation was not much different from the one Ed Robbin had to come up with two days ago. He simply stated that signing of a non-aggression pact with a fascist state did not make the Soviet Union pro-fascist; it meant they were just pro-peace.¹⁶⁸ Agnes Sis Cunningham, a member of the Communist Party and a future member of the Almanac Singers, saw the pact as Stalin's maneuver to gain time in order to strengthen the Soviet army because apparently the Soviet Union was all alone in this fight.¹⁶⁹

In fact, the text of the pact was drafted by the Russian side, namely Stalin himself and Molotov. Furthermore, it was the Russian side, again, to suggest the secret protocol that divided eastern Europe in between the Soviet Union and Germany. This was clearly not a step to achieve world peace. While millions of communists suffering under fascist rulers in Europe expected the Soviet Union to take necessary measures against them, Stalin was raising his toast for Hitler by saying, "I know how much the German nation loves its Führer; I should therefore drink to the health of this great man."¹⁷⁰

After the initial shock, though, the Communist Party pulled itself together and came up with new arguments to justify the pact as of September. Since arguments such as gaining time seemed to be short-lived, they changed their stance completely. The

¹⁶⁸ Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 130.

¹⁶⁹ Cunningham and Friesen, *Red Dust*, 181.

¹⁷⁰ John Lukacs, *June 1941: Hitler and Stalin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 54-55.

party declared the fight between the Nazi Germany and the Western allies “an imperialist war” that the Soviet Union needed to stay out of because Nazism was already a result of the hypocrisy of the Western world. Therefore, Hitler and those who fought against Hitler were equally guilty in the eyes of the communists.

People's World described England as “the greatest danger to Europe and all kind” and harshly criticized the US government for solely being an ally of those “raving maniacs.”¹⁷¹ In November 1939, a news report that appeared on a French newspaper claimed that Stalin had planned this whole thing in such a pattern that at the end it would benefit the communist cause. The Soviet Union would remain powerful as the other great powers of Europe damaged and weakened one another. At the end, from the ruins of a war-torn Europe, the Soviet Union would rise as the dominating superpower of the continent. The newspaper report further claimed that this was documented by the text of a speech made by Stalin himself to members of Politburo three days prior to the signing of the pact. As this was just the kind of justification that communists hopelessly clung into, numerous party members and writers referred to this text for a long time, until it was also proved to be nothing but a forged document.¹⁷²

Such explanations for this abrupt turn of the Communist Party were not bought in the Popular Front circles. It made clear that the party completely devoted itself to the interests of Soviet Union and did not have the slightest bit of independence although they had been promoting the Americanness of the communist cause so much.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace?*, 31-32.

¹⁷² Lukacs, *June 1941*, 56.

¹⁷³ Holter and Deverell, *Woody Guthrie L.A.*, 142.

From that point on, the Popular Front organizations started to weaken immensely one by one. More than one third of the members of the League of American Writers resigned. The League for Peace and Democracy was split into two halves since approximately 50 percent of its members condemned the pact. National Lawyers Guild lost all of its liberal members. It was the end of the Popular Front Era.¹⁷⁴

The perception of Franklin Roosevelt in the eyes of the communists had already flip-flopped overnight together with their entire stance, but in September 1939, when he called out the Congress to consider repealing the arms embargo provision of the Neutrality Act (1935) and thus provide England and France with an access to war materials, there was now no obstacle in front of them to blame him as a warmonger who was trying to drag the United States into a war that it had no reason to be involved in.¹⁷⁵ As a result, the late Thirties was a difficult time to be a communist, for sure. As David Caute put it, “the anti-fascist mission to which they had dedicated themselves for six years appeared to have been canceled, obliterated by Stalin with the stroke of a pen.”¹⁷⁶ As the Popular Front came tumbling down, the communists were once again on their own. The central figures of this study, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, had not met each other yet when all of these happened. The former was in Los Angeles, the most robust base of the Popular Front on the West Coast, and the latter was in New York, Popular Front’s center in the East. Therefore, they experienced the same shock at the same time in different places, but both remained

¹⁷⁴ Caute, *The Fellow-Travellers*, 200-201; Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace?*, 32.

¹⁷⁵ Stillman, *The American Heritage History*, 389.

¹⁷⁶ Caute, *The Fellow-Travellers*, 196.

loyal fellow travelers of the party line even after this sudden change of stance.¹⁷⁷

And it would not be the only unexpected change of stance that they had to go through either.



¹⁷⁷ Minna Bromberg and Gary Alan Fine, "Resurrecting the Red: Pete Seeger and the Purification of Difficult Reputations," *Social Forces* 80, no.4 (2002): 1140; Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 130.

CHAPTER III

“THE YANKS ARE NOT COMING”

In June 1939, two months before the signing of the non-aggression pact when the US government and the Popular Front were seemingly on good terms, the Roosevelt family hosted the King and Queen of England at the White House. Being a casual folk music listener, the First Lady put Charles Seeger in charge of organizing a folk music event at the White House for the special guests. Alan Lomax, who was working for the Library of Congress with Seeger at the time, was one of the performers of the night. Both Seeger and Lomax were known to have a certain sympathy towards the communist ideology despite not being members of the party. As the night proceeded, something odd caught Alan Lomax's attention. The secret service men of the White House kept bumping into him on several occasions and then apologized. Each time they did so, they subtly touched him, too. Lomax later realized that they were not bumping into him by accident, but it was done on purpose.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ Szwed, *The Man Who Recorded*, 148.

It turned out that secret service agents had been tailing him with the suspicion that he could carry out some kind of a dangerous act. Alan Lomax later learnt that it was because a random woman who identified herself as his aunt had called the FBI and said his nephew was a dangerous communist and he could “do something crazy” upon entering the White House.¹⁷⁹ The secret service’s strange way of inspecting a person who was a potential terrorist and a valued guest of the White House at the same time caught the attention of the First Lady as well. Years later when she remembered that night, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote these lines:

When the young man [Alan Lomax] came in after the dinner, he was “frisked” by our secret service men . . . and apparently was so frightened he could hardly sing. I hoped fervently that he would not reach for his handkerchief during the performance because I was sure the secret service would jump on him.¹⁸⁰

This specific occasion is a clear indication of how superficial and fragile the amity between the government and the leftist folk musicians of the time was. An unidentified woman’s unconfirmed claims on a guest of the White House was enough for the agents to see him as a potential threat just because he was a communist. It is true that the signing of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in August 1939 destroyed the Popular Front and turned the relationship between the President and the people who were officially or unofficially supporters of the Popular Front into a diametrically opposing direction. However, this incident that took place two months before the pact demonstrates that it was not a very healthy relationship to begin with. The government considered communists as a threat, whereas communists were not fond of Roosevelt either. Soon enough, after August 1939 onwards, both sides would lay their cards on the table. This chapter focuses on this period when so-called old

¹⁷⁹ Szwed, *The Man Who Recorded*, 149.

¹⁸⁰ Eleanor Roosevelt, *This I Remember* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 191.

friends became foes. Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, two firm believers of the Popular Front and the necessity of an all-out fight against the fascists, would now get together and become one of the loudest voices of people who campaigned against World War II and Roosevelt's desire to become a part of it.

3.1 The Renaissance of American Folk Song

The non-aggression pact signed between the Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union was difficult to digest for the American communist circles. Georgi Dimitrov, the head of the Comintern who called for a large coalition of ideologies and declared the rising of fascism as the number one threat that the world had to fight against only four years ago, informed Earl Browder about their new stance in October 1939 by stating that what was going on in Europe was an imperialist war between two equally guilty parties rather than a fight for democracy or a war against fascism. Hitler was still the devil himself, but he was unknowingly "shattering the bourgeoisie in Europe," and both Soviet Union and the United States had to stay out of this imperialist war.¹⁸¹ Earl Browder, who had made fun of the rumors of a possible German-Soviet non-aggression pact in June by stating "[t]here is as much chance of agreement as of Earl Browder being elected President of the Chamber of Commerce," now had to defend the reasons why such an agreement was necessary.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ After receiving these messages on a short-wave radio receiver, Browder shared them with his friend Philip Jaffe, and Jaffe made them public via his book. Philip Jaffe, *The Rise and Fall of American Communism* (New York: Horizon, 1975), 44-47.

¹⁸² Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 387.

Author Granville Hicks, a famous figure of the Communist Party, resigned from the party shortly after signing of the pact arguing that the pact and the party's unquestioning support for it did not only tear apart the Political Front but also destroyed the party's credibility. He said, "When the Party reverses itself overnight, and offers nothing but nonsense in explanation, who is likely to be influenced by a communist's recommendations?"¹⁸³ He was right in a sense, but there were still plenty of people who continued to support the party's line despite not being members of it. Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie were two of them. The reason why Seeger and Guthrie's sympathy for the Communist Party remained the same after this sudden turnabout can be explained by the fact that they saw something bigger in the communist ideology. It was the fundamental values of the communists that both men attributed more importance to. Similar to Seeger's statement on how communists were against or in favor of the same things as him, Guthrie once said that communists were still the only group of people trying to organize the migrants in the San Joaquin Valley to fight for their rights against the cotton growers there, so their change of stance during the war did not matter much.¹⁸⁴

War is a game played by maniacs who kill each other. It is murder, studied and prepared by insane minds, and followed by a bunch of thieves. You can't believe in life and wear the uniform of death. . . . Locate the man who profits by war – strip him of his profits and war will end.¹⁸⁵

Thus, Guthrie embraced this new anti-war stance and started writing on his daily column accordingly. Not aware of the fact that four years later he would voluntarily wear the military uniform that he called "uniform of death," he argued the people of

¹⁸³ Granville Hicks, *Part of the Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), 185.

¹⁸⁴ Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 130.

¹⁸⁵ Guthrie, *Woody Sez*, 62-63.

working class fought in this war and the ruling class benefited from it. He agreed with the discourse of the Communist Party that claimed World War II was an imperialist war, and he claimed that as long as there were poor people and rich people, the world would continue to face such conflicts. The only way to “do away with the wars,” he argued, was to “do away with the poor folks, do away with the rich folks, and do away with middle class folks.”¹⁸⁶

However, his support of the non-aggression pact came at a cost, and his radio program on KFVD was ended by the channel’s manager who despised Stalin for making peace with Hitler.¹⁸⁷ Having nothing to do on the West Coast now, he hit the roads again and eventually ended up in New York, where he would soon meet Pete Seeger. During this months-long coast-to-coast trip, he once again found the chance to observe his people and his country. He found Irving Berlin’s famous song “God Bless America,” which was originally written during World War I but became popular once again after 1938 onwards, “unrealistic and complacent.”¹⁸⁸ The song only focused on the high mountains, green prairies, and white foams of the oceans, while the realities of the United States that Guthrie saw were different. Therefore, upon arriving New York after a tiresome road trip, he wrote his response to Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America,” and named it “God Blessed America for Me.”

When the sun come shining, then I was strolling
In the wheat fields waving and dust clouds rolling;
The voice was chanting as the fog was lifting:
God blessed America for me.

One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple,
By the Relief Office, I saw my people –

¹⁸⁶ Guthrie, *Woody Sez*, 63-64.

¹⁸⁷ Kaufman, *Mapping Woody Guthrie*, 56-57.

¹⁸⁸ Wrinkler, *Music of World War II*, 87.

As they stood hungry, I stood there wondering if
God blessed America for me.¹⁸⁹

Four years later, in 1944, a very different Woody Guthrie would come across this song among numerous other manuscripts of his and record a revised version of it. He would cross out the relatively radical lines, change the lines that said, “God blessed America for me,” with “This land is made for you and me,” and give the song a new title: “This Land is Your Land.” Although some interpreted this as an indication of how much Guthrie changed in this period, this new and softened version of the song still differed from “God Bless America” as in it did not look to God for making this nation as it was; instead, it emphasized the need for embracing one’s nation with its good and bad, rich and poor, beautiful and ugly, as it was their land after all.¹⁹⁰

Back to the year 1940, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger were now in the same city, inside the same social circles. Woody did not like New York very much. He wrote a lot about how the city was too crowded and full of tall buildings. “Sun is up in New York. Only trouble is you can’t see it. Got to wait ‘till 1.30 PM in the afternoon and then it is visible for seven minutes between the Empire State Building and that shoe sign,” he once wrote to complain. On another account, he noted that the metro was usually so crowded that one could not even fall down.¹⁹¹ Pete Seeger, on the other hand, was working under Alan Lomax for his project to collect American protest folk songs in a book that would be titled *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*. The two took part in a fundraising gathering for farm workers to which Woody

¹⁸⁹ Pete Seeger, “Woody Writes ‘This Land is Your Land,’” track 4 on *Pete Remembers Woody*, Appleseed Recordings, 2012.

¹⁹⁰ Jackson, *Prophet Singer*, 27-28.

¹⁹¹ Guthrie, *Woody Sez*, 106, 112.

Guthrie also attended. Lomax had heard of Guthrie before, but it was the first time he ever listened to him singing. He was mesmerized with Guthrie's performance:

I remember the first song I heard him sing. . . . I realized that I was meeting a guy who was a ballad maker in the same sense as the people who made . . . all the ballads that I spent my life trying to find and preserve for the American people. I thought they were from anonymous people. Well, here was Mr. Anonymous singing to me.¹⁹²

Among some of the country's most distinguished folk musicians such as Burl Ives, Leadbelly, and Josh White, Pete Seeger also performed for the first time in front of a crowd that night. Just like Alan Lomax, Seeger was also impressed with Guthrie's performance. He later said that immediately after listening to him for the first time, he wanted to know more about him.¹⁹³ Years later, remembering that night, Alan Lomax said: "Go back to that night when Pete first met Woody Guthrie. You can date the renaissance of American folk song from that night."¹⁹⁴

It was the beginning of a years-long companionship of the two legendary figures of American folk music. For Guthrie, everything about Seeger seemed strange at the beginning. "That guy Seeger, I can't make him out. He doesn't look at girls, he doesn't drink, he doesn't smoke, fellow's weird," he said about his first impression of Seeger.¹⁹⁵ For Seeger, on the other hand, Guthrie was a person from whom he had a lot to learn. "I was an intellectual from New England, and he was a self-made intellectual from a small town in Oklahoma. He was determined not to let himself be

¹⁹² Szwed, *The Man Who Recorded*, 157-158.

¹⁹³ Seeger, *The Incomplete Folksinger*, 43.

¹⁹⁴ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing*, 64.

¹⁹⁵ Pete Seeger, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone: A Singer's Stories, Songs, Seeds, Robberies* (Bethlehem: Sing Out Corporation, 1993), 205.

changed . . . [and] I was eager to change,” he said.¹⁹⁶ His biographer, Meryl Danziger, described the difference between the two by stating that “Woody Guthrie was seven years and a lifetime of experience older than Pete.”¹⁹⁷

Together with Alan Lomax, the two went back to Washington, D.C. which Guthrie once defined as the town one would go to “make laws, break laws, rake laws, fake laws, take laws and shake laws.”¹⁹⁸ As a group, they worked on Lomax’s folk music collection project together and completed the book *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* only to find out that no publisher wanted to publish it due to the book’s radical leftist content.¹⁹⁹ It was only the beginning of the cold war between the power holders and these leftist folk musicians that would last until June 1941. Both Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger were now more aware of the political atmosphere they were in.

The House Committee on Un-American Activities was established in 1938 to investigate reported or suspected subversive individuals and groups belonging to either right or left side of the political spectrum. As of 1940, these investigations focused almost solely on the leftists.²⁰⁰ Alien Registration Act of 1940, also known as the Smith Act, made it a crime to publicly talk about the necessity of overthrowing the government or make propaganda of it. It was followed by the Voorhis Anti-Propaganda Act which strictly required any social and political groups

¹⁹⁶ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 284.

¹⁹⁷ Danziger, *Sing It!*, 18.

¹⁹⁸ Guthrie, *Woody Sez*, 18.

¹⁹⁹ Edgmon and Logsdon, *Woody’s Road*, 66-67.

²⁰⁰ Marc E. Johnson, “‘The Masses are Singing’: Insurgency and Songs in New York City, 1939-1941,” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2003), 239.

under control of a non-US state to get official registration from the government to operate. Earl Browder himself ended up being one of the three hundred of Communist Party members to get arrested throughout the year of 1940. Shortly after calling President Roosevelt the spokesmen of the Wall Street and ally of the economic royalists during a speech in Boston, he was arrested, charged with using counterfeit passport and sentenced to two years.²⁰¹

Being a fervent traveler, it was time for Guthrie to move along. This time, Pete Seeger accompanied him. Pete had never been to the West; he had only visited the South once with his father as a high school student. “[Woody] was like my big, big education, learning about America,” Pete Seeger later said about their road trips together.²⁰² On the road, they became friends, and their political conversations affected and evolved one another. Guthrie was already being tailed by the FBI since his days at KFVD Radio, and now Pete Seeger was added to the list.²⁰³ For months, they toured the country, performed at union gatherings and clubs. Pete Seeger, who already shared basically the same political views and same ideals as Guthrie, learnt a lot from him about songwriting and performing, too. As the political atmosphere intensified, their songs became more related to the war going on around the world.

We don't know just who will ever win the battle.
And as far as we're concerned, we do not care
If they bombard good old Tokio—
Well, I guess that's okie dokio.
But let's pray they don't go droppin' 'em over here.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Guenter Lewy, *The Cause That Failed: Communism in American Political Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 65; Leonards, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau*, 43-44.

²⁰² Pete Seeger, “My Big Education,” track 6 on *Pete Remembers Woody*, Appleseed Recordings, 2012.

²⁰³ Leonards, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau*, 15.

²⁰⁴ Woody Guthrie, “The Chinese and the Japs,” quoted from Cray, *Ramblin' Man*, 106.

Even though he would later side with the Chinese, at the time Guthrie was in complete agreement with the Communist Party's non-interventionist propaganda. As long as the bombs did not drop onto American soils, he argued, he did not have a problem with it. What he and Pete were not okay with was the social economic injustices. It was nothing new for Woody, but the time they spent among mine workers, farm workers, industrial workers, and all other kinds of laborers and unionists, they became more concerned with these issues. This would later have its influence on the songs of the Almanac Singers, too.

Jesus Christ was a man who traveled through the land
Hard working man and brave
He said to the rich, "give your goods to the poor."
So they laid Jesus Christ in his grave.
When Jesus came to town, the working folks around
Believed what he did say;
The bankers and the preachers, they nailed him on a cross
And they laid Jesus Christ in his grave.²⁰⁵

Sometimes, he used religion to make his point more easily understandable. In such a world where even Jesus Christ could not manage to convince the rich to share what they had with the poor; he was trying to achieve the impossible. However, through singing, they at least managed to influence people. Guthrie liked the idea of instilling hope into people's hearts, and it was still better than doing nothing. "I hate a song that makes you think that you're not any good. I hate a song that makes you think you're just born to lose," he said. He explained his ultimate goal as to sing songs that will make people take pride in themselves no matter what.²⁰⁶ The person who he managed to influence most was nobody other than his companion in this road trip.

²⁰⁵ Woody Guthrie, "Jesus Christ," track 13 on *This Land is Your Land: The Asch Recordings, Vol. 1*, Smithsonian Folkways, 1997.

²⁰⁶ Lieberman, *My Songs is My Weapon*, 1.

Through Woody's songs, Pete's faith in the power of music was restored. Seeing how effective Woody could use his guitar as a weapon just like it was written "This Machine Kills Fascists" on it, Pete was inspired to do the same. Soon this slogan was emblazoned on his banjo: "This Machine Surrounds Hate and Forces It To Surrender."²⁰⁷ Even though he learnt a lot from Guthrie, and they became friends during their travel across the nation, Pete was still the first to stop wandering around and come back to New York. Woody would eventually come back and join him there, but now it was time for young Pete Seeger to practice what he had learnt so far.²⁰⁸

3.2 "The Peace Army"

Back in New York in the fall of 1940, Pete Seeger started looking for publishers who would agree to publish their finished book, *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*. In a letter he wrote to Millard Lampell many years later, he remembered how he met Lee Hays: "Somebody told me that a man named Lee Hays, . . . also trying to find a publisher for a book of union songs. It seemed to me logical that we should get together and not duplicate each other's work, or at least not get in each other's way too much. Perhaps we could join forces." And join forces they did.²⁰⁹ Lee Hays was from the South, so his story was quite different from both Seeger and Guthrie. The circumstances he had to live through the Thirties played a significant role in his becoming politicized. Years later, he said of his awakening:

²⁰⁷ Danziger, *Sing It!*, 19.

²⁰⁸ Cray, *Ramblin' Man*, 185.

²⁰⁹ Seeger, *Pete Seeger in His Own Words*, 16-17.

The more I read, the more it seemed to me that something was awfully wrong. That somewhere there was an awful lot of money, and the people who had it didn't have it because they'd worked for it. And everywhere there were a lot of people who needed money who didn't have it, who were willing to work for it and had no chance to do so. Somewhere along in there, I became some kind of socialist. Just what kind I've never to this day figured out.²¹⁰

The things he read and the things he learnt led him into the same political direction as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. Just like them, Hays did not become a member of the Communist Party but preferred to maintain his fellow-travelership. As he spent time among labor unionists, he grew a particular interest in the relationship between leftist politics, labor unions and folk music. He eventually moved to New York and became roommates with Millard Lampell. Mill, as his friends called him, was at the same age as Pete Seeger, and just like him, he was a college dropout. He was suspended in his senior year for refusing to participate in the mandatory military training.²¹¹ He was not a musician; his passion was on writing. He had been writing for a leftist picture magazine, *Friday*. He did not play any instruments and never claimed he was good at singing, either. Therefore, when Lee Hays and Pete Seeger started performing as a duo in several events, he did not take part. As the duo's bookings increased, however, he began to attend some of their performances from time to time. Soon, he became a natural member because he was frankly very good at coming up with new lines to their songs, or sometimes whole new set of lyrics to be turned into songs.²¹² This was exactly what Seeger and Hays needed in the absence of Woody Guthrie.

²¹⁰ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 19-20.

²¹¹ Doug Galloway, "Millard Lampell," *Variety*, October 15, 1997.

²¹² Cunningham and Friesen, *Red Dust*, 208; Cray, *Ramblin' Man*, 218-219.

Soon, Guthrie joined them as well, and in February 1941, the quartet decided to act as a band, naming themselves the Almanac Singers. It was Lee Hays who thought of the name. He said, “Back where I come from, a family had two books. The Bible to help them to the next world. The Farmer’s Almanac, to help them through the present world.”²¹³ When asked about the meaning of this name, with all his carelessness, Woody Guthrie responded by saying it was a good name “which meant whatever anybody thought it meant.”²¹⁴ The Almanac Singers was not a traditional band. While the quartet consisting of Seeger, Guthrie, Hays and Lampell remained as the core members from the beginning until the end, numerous other folk musicians of the time joined the group from time to time in several events. They never signed up for anything to become a member of the group, nor they were required to stay together with the group. Even Guthrie, as one of the core members, frequently continued his road trips in and out of New York.

Alan Lomax’s sister Bess Lomax Hawes, who also acted as a member of the band for quite some time, described how loose the membership of the Almanac Singers was: “We almost always accepted every invitation to sing anywhere . . . and thereby managed to double-and even triple-book ourselves on popular evenings, forcing us to dash wildly from Queens to Brooklyn and far Yonkers, sometimes dividing ourselves in two.”²¹⁵ At one particular night, according to the report of the *Daily*

²¹³ Seeger, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone: A Singalong Memoir*, 19.

²¹⁴ Lee Hays, “Almanacs: Part II,” *People’s Songs Bulletin* 3 (November 1948), 9.

²¹⁵ Hawes, *Sing It Pretty*, 41-42.

Worker, three separate groups performed in three different gatherings in New York under the name of the Almanac Singers.²¹⁶

The political stance of the group was completely compatible with the one of the Communist Party at the time, but this did not mean all the members of the group had embraced the same ideology. While some members of the band remained solely as fellow travelers, there were times when some card-carrying members of the party joined the group as well. Or, like Burl Ives, there were some members who would later strictly state that they were not a communist and never believed in the communist philosophy.²¹⁷ However, no other members except for the core quartet contributed to songwriting processes. Therefore, from the very beginning until the end of the band's existence, whatever political stance Seeger, Guthrie, Hays and Lampell embraced was also the stance of the Almanac Singers.

The group had two primary points of focus: songs for anti-war propaganda and songs to praise labor unions. With the inspiration they got from Joe Hill and IWW, the Almanacs worked hard to create (or continue) a singing labor movement. Pete Seeger argued that the reason why it had not been achieved so far was due to the fact that the union songs all contained so much negativity in their content. "Yes, they mention the boss. Yes, they mention the strike, the picket line, local slogans, all the odds and addendum of local parlance. But of local spirit, the gaiety, the fun, the horseplay, the romance, the anger—how much of these human qualities?"²¹⁸ He

²¹⁶ Don Russell, "They Sing Hard Hitting Songs That Belong to the People," *Daily Worker*, August 14, 1941, 7.

²¹⁷ Leonards, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau*, 1.

²¹⁸ Seeger, *Pete Seeger in His Own Words*, 85.

concluded union songs needed to be fun to sing. That is what they endeavored to achieve.

They made a significant effort to make their anti-war songs unique as well. For the last two years, there had been several other anti-war songs which were popular among the common folk. However, there was a subtle difference between the anti-war songs of the Almanac Singers and the other popular anti-war songs of the time. While the war-related songs of the Almanac Singers usually included an apparent purpose to show the dark and depressing side of the war, the majority of other popular anti-war songs released between 1939 and 1941 praised the idea of American non-interventionism rather than the idea of peace.

Allan Flynn and Frank Madden's song "I'm the Son of a Legionnaire," for example, argued that the United States should have learnt its lessons from World War I about staying out of the war unless being invaded. In such case, "This son of a gun will grab a gun and do his very best" to defend his country, but otherwise the United States needed to let them do whatever they wanted. In a similar tone, Frank Westphal said "Let's stay at home, why would we roam? Let us say, U.S.A, you're good enough for me," in his song "My Own U.S.A."²¹⁹ As a response to a viral war song of World War I, "Over There," in which the chorus sang "Send the word, send the word over there that the Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming," Bernie Wayne, Nat Gardner and Hy Zaret made a song titled "The Yanks Are Not Coming." This song also mentioned the US entrance into World War I as a mistake:

They fooled us back in seventeen but now we know the gag.
The Yanks are not coming a hundred million strong.
We're staying in our own back yard

²¹⁹ Jones, *The Songs That Fought the War*, 57-59.

‘Cause that’s where we belong.²²⁰

This slogan was quickly embraced by the Communist Party. In order to make propaganda of anti-war sentiments, Yanks-Are-Not-Coming Committees were formed across the nation. Pamphlets that read “The Yanks Are Not Coming” were distributed to tens of thousands of people.²²¹

The pen of the Almanac Singers was strong. They sang songs against contemporary problems of the people such as racism and poverty. They gave hope to thousands of union members with each and every one of their union-related songs. Their anti-war songs included a serious criticism of President Roosevelt, and sometimes even accused him of things. Soon, they started to perform in front of larger crowds. According to the observers of their performances, they were not singing *for* the audience but singing *with* them. After listening to their live performance once, author Theodore Dreiser went near the members of the band and said, “If there were six more teams like you, we could save America.”²²²

In April, the Almanac Singers decided to record their first album full of “peace songs” as they preferred to call them instead of anti-war songs. They declared that they were members of the peace army: “We are in the peace army. Remember that a singing army is a winning army.”²²³ The tone and content of the songs was so harsh, and the overall theme of the album was so bitter that their producer company, Keynote Records, did not allow them to publish the album under their name and tried

²²⁰ Jones, *The Songs That Fought the War*, 58.

²²¹ Lewy, *The Cause That Failed*, 63.

²²² George Lewis, “America is in Their Songs,” *Daily Worker*, March 24, 1941, 7.

²²³ Danziger, *Sing It!*, 20.

to hide themselves as much as possible. It was not a company that claimed to maintain its political neutrality. On the contrary, they had been regularly advertising the albums they released on *Daily Worker*, and among those albums were such works as *Red Army Chorus* and *Soviet Folk Songs*. However, the content of *Songs for John Doe* was too controversial even for them. Therefore, instead of Keynote, the group published the album under the label of Almanac Records, a company that did not really exist.²²⁴

The album consisted of seven songs. The *Daily Worker* argued that it was “a fine writeup” which made people from all over the country say that at last there was some good music that really defined people’s true feelings about the war.²²⁵ The first and the most popular song of the album was “Ballad of October 16,” which was about the Draft Act that the Congress passed less than a year ago, making it mandatory for all American male individuals from the age of 21 to 36 to register for draft. It was the first peacetime conscription in the history of the United States, and the fact that the government took an action like this was an indication of some serious preparation for the war. The anti-war circles condemned this action of the government by claiming that Roosevelt was getting ready for the war despite his repeated public assertions about keeping the country out of the war.²²⁶

Oh, Franklin Roosevelt told the people how he felt
We damned near believed what he said.
He said, “I hate war, and so does Eleanor
But we won’t be safe ‘till everybody’s dead.”²²⁷

²²⁴ Koppelman, *Sing Out, Warning*, 76; Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 67.

²²⁵ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 68.

²²⁶ Jones, *The Songs That Fought the War*, 62; Young and Young, *Music of the World War II Era*, 3.

²²⁷ The Almanac Singers, “Ballad of October 16,” track 1 on *Songs for John Doe*, Almanac Records, 1941.

These lines personally attacking the President and the First Lady could be interpreted as the band's open declaration of war on the White House. Thus, the song was quickly embraced by the communist groups and became the most popular song of the whole album. It would also be a fruitful material for the critics of the band to use against them after their turnabout in June 1941. "C for Conscription" was another song that blamed the government for the enactment of the same bill:

I'd rather be at home
Even sleeping in a holler log
Than go to the army
And be treated like a dirty dog.²²⁸

After claiming that the letter "C" did not only stand for conscription but also for Capitol Hill and the Congress "that passed that goddamn bill," the song argues that anything is better than becoming a member of the army and going to war. The implication that soldiers in the army were treated "like a dirty dog" and calling the draft act a "goddamn bill" led to a disturbance among the supporters of the government.²²⁹

In "Washington Breakdown," the Almanac Singers directly and personally addressed the President. The song starts with these lines: "Franklin D., listen to me! You ain't a-gonna send me 'cross the sea." After calling the president by his first name in a sardonic tone, the next lines claimed that Roosevelt was determined to kill his people and yet he kept lying about it by saying the conscription bill was only for defense.²³⁰ With the next song in the album, "Plow Under," the Almanac Singers hit two birds

²²⁸ The Almanac Singers, "'C' for Conscription," track 3 on *Songs for John Doe*, Almanac Records, 1941.

²²⁹ Leonards, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau*, 55.

²³⁰ The Almanac Singers, "Washington Breakdown," track 7 on *Songs for John Doe*, Almanac Records, 1941.

with one stone and criticized Roosevelt's wartime policies and the New Deal practices at the same time by drawing an analogy between his so-called determination for entering the war and the Agricultural Adjustment Act's (AAA) order of plowing under of cotton and hogs.²³¹

Remember when the AAA
Killed a million hogs a day?
Instead of hogs it's men today
Plow the fourth one under.²³²

The song claims that nothing has changed since the disputed AAA practices of destroying "surplus" animals and agricultural products. Then, the government had claimed that "our agricultural system was about to fall," and that "the price of cotton wouldn't rise." And now, the Almanacs argued, the government was after the same policy of killing the "surplus" young men of the country, because the system would not work otherwise. Thus, they interpreted the government's peacetime draft as a preparation to plow under American boys. And the song ends with a line of bold defiance: "Now the politicians rant a boy's no better than a cotton plant, but we are here to say you can't plow the fourth one under."²³³

While the first half of the album consisted of anti-Roosevelt songs rather than anti-war songs, the rest of it focused on the dark side of the war, which made their stance unique among many other songs condemning the government and its wartime policies. In "Liza Jane," the narrator is a young man who is in love with a girl named Liza Jane. The song starts just like a typical ballad, the boy's depiction of the girl he

²³¹ Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 proposed killing millions of hogs and cattle and plowing under millions of acres of cotton with the belief that reducing the supply would increase the demand and fix the problem in the market. Claudia Reinhardt and Bill Ganzel, "Culling the Herds," Living History Farm, 2003, https://livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/crops_17.html.

²³² The Almanac Singers, "Plow Under," track 5 on *Songs for John Doe*, Almanac Records, 1941.

²³³ Ibid.

loves and his expression of how he is in love with her. Then the brutal truths of the world he lives in interfere:

I'm gonna marry her if I can
She loves me 'cause I'm a union man.
Heard a speech by the President
Wants to put me in a regiment.

After he registers for draft, things never become any better for him. First, the Congress “takes [the workers’] rights to strike away,” then cuts the payments and raises the rents. They justify all these by claiming “it’s all for national defense,” but the only thing that the narrator is interested in is the fact that he aims to be a married man, but he cannot as he is not able to afford it. The song ends with the young man’s consolation of the woman he loves: “Dry your tears,” he says. “I don’t aim to be no bundle for Britain.”²³⁴

The story of the song “Billy Boy” resembles “Liza Jane” as both songs offer an insight to an ordinary young American man’s reluctance to be a part of this war that does not interest them at all. The structure of the song is based on a dialog between the vocals and a young man named Billy.

Can you use a bayonet, Billy boy, Billy boy?
Can you use a bayonet, charming Billy?
No, I haven’t got the skill to murder and to kill
Don’t you want a silver medal, Billy boy, Billy boy?
Don’t you want a silver medal, charlin’ Billy?
No desire do I feel to defend Republic Steel.²³⁵

Billy does not know how to make use of a bayonet to kill another soul, and he is not interested in what the state offers him in return, either. The reason why the Almanac Singers specifically mentioned Republic Steel through Billy’s narration has its roots

²³⁴ The Almanac Singers, “Liza Jane,” track 4 on *Songs for John Doe*, Almanac Records, 1941.

²³⁵ The Almanac Singers, “Billy Boy,” track 2 on *Songs for John Doe*, Almanac Records, 1941.

in the Memorial Day Massacre of 1937. The notorious incident that took place in Chicago started when workers peacefully marching for their unionization rights were stopped by the police. Immediately after a group of thugs sent by the Republic Steel's management was positioned near the police, a conflict broke out between them and the demonstrators. The cooperation of Republic Steel and Chicago Police Department left behind ten demonstrators dead and dozens wounded.²³⁶

After Billy says, "it wouldn't be much thrill to die for Dupont in Brazil," the vocals tell him "Girls would like your uniform, Billy boy, Billy boy." As an answer, Billy says "They wouldn't get much chance to love me with six feet of earth above me." With these lines, Billy admits his fears of dying in vain. Finally, when the vocals ask him "Will they take you from my side, Billy boy, Billy boy?" Billy responds to them by saying "Don't you worry, mother dear, I'm stayin' over here," and thus the song reveals it has been his mother talking to him since the beginning, which makes the song's overall mood even more dramatic.²³⁷

"Strange Death of John Doe," also the song that gave the album its name, was the most striking song of the entire album according to many people, including Lee Hays. The song is about a young man named John Doe,²³⁸ suddenly dropping dead one day. He is a tall, well-built young man, "always well from foot to head." Until the very end of the song, there seems to be no reason for his death at all.

They found him dead so I've been told.
His eyes were closed, his heart was cold;
Only one clue to why he died –

²³⁶ Allen, *Since Yesterday*, 291-293.

²³⁷ The Almanac Singers, "Billy Boy."

²³⁸ John Doe is a name used to refer to a dead person whose true identity is unknown.

A bayonet sticking in his side.²³⁹

Until the very last line that reveals the cause of his death, the song keeps the audience curious about the possible reasons for it. When it is understood that he is dead because of a bayonet attack during the war, it “hit people right between the eyes, like a nine-pound striking hammer,” Lee Hays said.²⁴⁰ Thus, quite unexpectedly, the song shows the dark side of the war that is often missed out, or deliberately overlooked. Among the discussions on diplomatic relationships of the states, forming alliances, signing pacts, reciprocal threats and everything else, the real cost of the war was the lives of people like John Doe.

The album turned out to be as controversial as Keynote Records was afraid it would be. In his article on *The Atlantic*, Carl Joachim Friedrich bombarded the album saying that the content of it was “strictly subversive and illegal” even though the band had been marketing it under the “peace songs appeal.” Another article that appeared on *TIME* defined the group as a “Manhattan Communist ensemble,” and argued that the songs “scrupulously echoed the mendacious Moscow tunes.”²⁴¹ Pete Seeger later learnt that even Franklin Roosevelt himself listened to the songs in the album after being informed about it. Not surprisingly, he was not happy with what he heard, and the first thing he said to the chief librarian of the Congress was “Can we stop this in some way?” to which he got the answer: “Not unless you want to break the First Amendment of the US Constitution.” All Roosevelt could do was to order

²³⁹ The Almanac Singers, “Strange Death of John Doe,” track 6 on *Songs for John Doe*, Almanac Records, 1941.

²⁴⁰ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 68-69.

²⁴¹ Carl Joachim Friedrich, “The Poison in Our System,” *The Atlantic*, June 1941, 668; “June Records,” *TIME*, June 6, 1941.

his chief librarian to make sure the radio channels would not play these songs. This way, “not many people will hear it,” he hoped.

The songs were never played on the air, but the fame of the Almanacs and the bold content of their songs traveled from one coast of the nation to another among the leftist circles in a matter of weeks. Eric Bernay, head of the Keynote recording company, soon contacted the group and asked if they were up to making another album together.²⁴² Thus, only a month after the release of *Songs for John Doe*, the group recorded another album under the name *Talking Union*. All six songs in the album praised labor unions, importance of them for the workers and the strength of them that the employers were not aware of. Even though the overall stance was still anti-capitalist and pro-communist, the content of the songs was much less controversial. Nevertheless, there were still inevitable references to the political agenda of those days, like these lines in the “Talking Union,” the song that gave the album its name:

They’ll tell you it’s a crime to have a union card.
They’ll raid your meetin’, they’ll hit you on the head,
They’ll call every one of you a goddam red,
Unpatriotic, Japanese spies, sabotaging national defense!²⁴³

“They,” in this song, were the employers who would try every possible way to prevent their employees from being organized. Alongside the accusation of being a “goddamn red,” which was the easiest way to damage the reputation of a person at the time, some other popular accusations such as “unpatriotic,” “Japanese spy” and “saboteur of national defense” gave away the political atmosphere of the time.

²⁴² Seeger, *Pete Seeger In His Own Words*, 18.

²⁴³ The Almanac Singers, “Talking Union,” track 3 on *Talking Union*, Keynote Records, 1941.

Even many years later, Pete Seeger still claimed the album *Talking Union* was one of the best sets of union songs ever. However, they were still far away from creating a singing labor movement. On those days he noted, “From listening to the *Talking Union* record and reading a couple of novels about the labor struggles of the Thirties, one might jump to the conclusion that the United States was full of class-conscious harmonizing those days. ‘Taint true.” Their songs were still known more in the leftist circles than among workers. They needed to make their sounds heard by those people, too. Therefore, having released two albums in the period of two months, it was time for the Almanac Singers to realize their goal of starting a singing labor movement.²⁴⁴

3.3 The Flip-Flop

From May to late June, the Almanac Singers traveled thousands of miles across the nation. They performed at union meetings, migrant camps, community colleges, anti-fascist rallies and so on. In order to fund their trips, Alan Lomax arranged deals for two more albums in the meantime. *Deep Sea Chanteys and Whaling Ballads* and *Sod Buster Ballads* were both recorded and released in June 1941. Both albums consisted completely of traditional American folk songs, and they did not include any additional political content because commercial success was the primary goal with these works.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Seeger, “Whatever Happened,” 29.

²⁴⁵ Young and Young, *Music of the World War II Era*, 17; Sørensen, “Almanac Songs and Singers,” 38.

This incredibly productive period of the band came to a halt with the news of a new situation developing between Germany and the Soviet Union. The power balance had already become shifty in Europe recently. Bess Lomax, who was the most recent member of the band at the time, wrote these lines in order to depict the atmosphere: “It was a frightening time. Every day, it seemed, another once-stable European political reality would fall to the rapidly expanding Nazi armies, and the agonies of the death camps were beginning to reach our ears.”²⁴⁶

On June 22, 1941, Hitler’s army officially entered the lands of the Soviet Union, thus ending the non-aggression pact that caused the entire American communist movement to give up on its Popular Front policies less than two years ago. The Almanac Singers were hosting a gathering when the news arrived at the Almanac House²⁴⁷ in New York. The peace songs that they were playing had to stop suddenly. After a minute of silence, arguments -which would not come to an end until the attack on Pearl Harbor- started immediately on what to do now.²⁴⁸ Obviously, they could not keep singing peace songs while their audience consisted heavily of communists, but it would not be any easier to reposition themselves to the point where they were twenty-two months ago, either.

Moreover, during the Popular Front era, it was possible to declare war on fascism while maintaining an anti-war stance at the same time. At that time, fighting against fascism did not necessarily mean killing Nazi soldiers or landing troops on Italian

²⁴⁶ Hawes, *Sing It Pretty*, 43.

²⁴⁷ Members of the Almanac Singers lived at the same house which they called the Almanac House. It was an open house in which they invited their friends for casual gatherings, political conversations and folk music performances. Cunningham and Friesen, *Red Dust*, 209.

²⁴⁸ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 84-85.

soil. For some people it was conceived as a cultural warfare. As Charles Seeger put it, for instance, folk music itself was a weapon in this sense. Woody Guthrie took this statement one step further by saying that “even falling in love was a blow against Hitler.” The idea laying behind was the belief that fascism stood for hatred, racism and violence. Therefore, anything opposing these would mean standing against fascism.²⁴⁹

The inception of the invasion put an end to the almost two-year-old disputes on whether Stalin had planned all these or not. It turned out that Stalin had had no intention to rise from the ashes of war-torn Europe, or to buy some time for getting ready for the real combat against fascism. Although he was warned by American, British, and even Chinese governments about a possible German attack, he insisted on not making a move that would harm the non-aggression pact. His commitment to the pact did not break even when a deserter from the German army surrendered to Russian forces on June 21, 1941 and said that a massive German offense would begin in a couple of hours.²⁵⁰

Later it would be understood that this move of Nazi Germany would in fact change the entire course of the war, and some historians would remark June 22, 1941 as the most important turning point of World War II.²⁵¹ The effects of it would be seen for many years to come, but at that time, one of the fastest and most easily observable influence of it was on the political stance of the communists outside the Soviet Union and fellow travelers of the ideology. Some of the most fervent defenders of

²⁴⁹ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 151; Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 265.

²⁵⁰ Lukacs, *June 1941*, 83-84.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

non-interventionist policies in the United States had to make a one-hundred-eighty-degree turn almost overnight. After all, it did not make any sense for a communist to call for isolationism while the Soviet Union was under the invasion of fascists.²⁵²

In the case of the Almanac Singers, at that point, some members of the band were official members of the Communist Party USA. However, the independence claims of the core quartet had not changed since the beginning. They did not accept any allegations about being responsible to or getting directives from the Communist Party or Comintern. Lee Hays once said that they did not pay attention to the alignment between their political view and the one of the Communist Party. Instead, they did what they believed was right with their minds and with their hearts.²⁵³ However, their change of stance after the invasion of Soviet Union did not occur as organically as Hays described. Literally the next day, on June 23, Woody Guthrie came back to the Almanac House from another road trip, and when he saw Pete Seeger there, the first sentence coming out of his mouth was: “I guess we won’t be singing any more peace songs, will we?”²⁵⁴

As mentioned before, the power balance in Europe was quite easy to change at the time. There, a much bigger change than the change of stance of a bunch of folk musicians occurred: Winston Churchill, who had previously claimed that there was no one else more consistently opposing the communist ideology than himself, made almost the same public announcement as *Daily Worker*, America’s loudest communist media outlet, after the news of invasion spread worldwide. Both called

²⁵² Caute, *The Fellow-Travellers*, 208; Cray, *Ramblin’ Man*, 215.

²⁵³ Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 57.

²⁵⁴ Pete Seeger, “The Flip-Flop,” track 22 on *Pete Remembers Woody*, Appleseed Recordings, 2012.

for aid to the Soviet allies because of the fact that the Soviet Union was under Nazi threat meant free world was under threat.²⁵⁵

Upon seeing that Hitler was the main enemy of this story, Churchill had apparently changed his mind as well. Confused by this sudden shift of the roles, Pete Seeger asked Guthrie if this meant they were now on the same side as Churchill. “Yep,” Guthrie replied, “Churchill’s flip-flopped. We’ve got to flip-flop, too.”²⁵⁶ Years later, when he was asked about that sudden turn, Lee Hays summarized the situation:

Our whole politics took a terrible shift from “The Yanks Ain’t Coming” to “The Yanks Are Coming.” All of a sudden, it became one war, instead of two, and there was some chance of beating fascism on its own ground, which everybody was for.²⁵⁷

This flip-flop of them cost an entire repertoire full of anti-war songs. Songs belonging to the album *Songs for John Doe* were never performed by the Almanac Singers after that point onwards. Even the remaining copies of the album were carefully collected from wherever they could be found. After a short period of silence that allowed them to plan their future political stance, the Almanac Singers once again started to wander around the country, performing at union organizations and all other kinds of gatherings, and singing only union songs now instead of peace songs.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁵ Seeger, *Pete Seeger in His Own Words*, 19.

²⁵⁶ Cray, *Ramblin’ Man*, 215; Seeger, “The Flip-Flop.”

²⁵⁷ Jim Capaldi “Wasn’t That a Time!: A Conversation with Lee Hays,” *Sing Out!* 28 (1981): 5.

²⁵⁸ Seeger, *Pete Seeger In His Own Words*, 19; Seeger, “The Flip-Flop.”

CHAPTER IV

THE NEW SITUATION

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his telegram sent to the National Conference of the Entertainment Industry for War Activities on June 12, 1943, emphasized the significance of entertainment industry especially when the country was in war by saying that it was “invaluable in times of peace,” but it was “indispensable in wartime.” He went on to congratulate the people working in the entertainment industry for their efforts as they were “building and maintaining national morale both on the battlefield and on the home front.”²⁵⁹ It was indeed a fact that World War II created its own entertainment culture. In order to appreciate the abundance of songs and literary works related to war, Rod McKuen once said that the period between 1939 and 1945 was a glorious time in the world for songwriters and fighter pilots. However, since then, various scholars have questioned the artistic quality and meaningfulness of the songs produced at this time and thus argued they were not “worthy.”²⁶⁰

²⁵⁹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Telegram to the National Conference of the Entertainment Industry for War Activities,” quoted in Jones, *The Songs That Fought the War*, 31.

²⁶⁰ Alec Wilder, *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 502.

Some claimed that it was because the American nation lacked the necessary idealism, innocence and unity that it had during World War I.²⁶¹ According to another approach, the concept of war songs was dead. War songs needed to sound like marches, but no one on the battleground marched anymore as the entire warfare was carried out by planes, tanks, trucks and other vehicles; therefore, there was no need for war songs anymore. Gordon Friesen, who joined the Almanac Singers as of late 1941 with his wife Agnes Cunningham, agreed with those who claimed the songs of World War II were “nothing to compare with the songs of the Revolution and Civil War, nor the somewhat lighter songs emerging from the First World War.” However, he had a different explanation for the primary reason for it. He argued that it was because the songwriters of the time were “sterilized and flattened” by the governmental institutions that on the surface seemed to be encouraging the production of war songs but actually regulated them and eventually made them all the same.²⁶²

It is enough to take a quick look at the titles of some of the most famous war songs written by American musicians and songwriters over the course of the war to understand the shallowness and sameness that Friesen mentioned: “America For Me,” “Long Live America,” “America My Home,” “America, My Own, My Native Land,” “America I Pray For You,” “March On America,” “Rise Up and Shine America,” “We’re In It, Let’s Win It!” “We’re Coming Back Again” and “The Yanks Are On The March Again” are just a few of numerous examples.²⁶³ Friesen

²⁶¹ Wilder, *American Popular Song*, 502.

²⁶² Cunningham and Friesen, *Red Dust*, 212.

²⁶³ Jones, *The Songs That Fought the War*, 118-127.

argued that it was because the whole nation was forced to align with the government's changing policies over the course of the war, and once they were actually in the war, songwriters had no chance other than declaring which side they were on publicly as soon as they could by releasing such songs. As a result of that, although countless of war songs were made during the war, almost nobody remembers them today.²⁶⁴

This was not the case with the Almanac Singers. First of all, their shift from an anti-war stance to the other side of the scale started six months before the Pearl Harbor attack. Moreover, although they stopped singing their peace songs as of June 1941, the transition period from anti-war to pro-war stance was neither quick nor smooth. A tumultuous six-months of adaptation to the new situation was followed by a short period of great nationwide popularity, and finally striking the bottom for good, all while supporting the American entrance into the war as an ally of the Soviet Union. This new stance of Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, both as members of the Almanac Singers and later on their individual paths after the group slowly disbanded, are the main subjects of this chapter.

4.1 “Which Side Are You On?”

The news of the invasion of the Soviet Union came when the Almanac Singers were in the middle of their nationwide tour. They had already been to numerous states, performing mostly at union events and leftist gatherings, singing their peace songs and union songs. Upon hearing about the invasion, the group's change of stance did

²⁶⁴ Young and Young, *Music of the World War II Era*, 5.

not occur as fast as the Communist Party itself. After all, it was not unusual for a political party to change what it defended and what it opposed every once in a while. There were countless of examples of it before and that could even be considered as one of the requirements of being a politician. However, the Almanac Singers, specifically Pete Seeger, were concerned that such a change in their stance would lead to losing all their credibility. Thus, they decided to take it easy and continue only with their union songs for a while. After a pause of two weeks, on July 3, they left New York again to continue their nationwide tour, having agreed to sing rural folk songs and union songs only. “We stopped singing our peace songs although they were good songs,” Pete Seeger said when he remembered how they abruptly lost almost half of their entire repertoire.²⁶⁵

During the tour, “Which Side Are You On?” was one of the group’s most popular songs although it did not originally belong to the Almanac Singers. The group often sang it as the opening song of their show, and the audience sang along with great enthusiasm. The song warned the workers that they were in a war against the big business in which they had no luxury as to remain neutral. After saying that “poor folks ain’t got a chance unless they organize,” the group asked the audience in chorus, “Which side are you on, boy? Which side are you on?”²⁶⁶ Ironically at the time, the Almanac Singers did not know which side they were on, either.

From Pete Seeger’s point of view, a valid cause of a war did not make the war itself any less violent or any less horrible. He considered himself a communist but as a set of ideals rather than a commitment he had no way to escape from. Years later, in a

²⁶⁵ Seeger, *Pete Seeger in His Own Words*, 19-21.

²⁶⁶ Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 200.

letter he sent to Harold Leventhal, he said that people had tried to make a politician out of him for all his life, while he had always considered himself as a musician with political opinions. He pointed out his songs as an indication of these opinions. He ended the letter with these lines: "I am about as much a communist as my songs are. I am about as anti-communist as my songs are. I am as American as my songs are. . . . I am as right as my songs are. And as wrong."²⁶⁷ Therefore, he did not change his stance overnight after the Communist Party dictated his followers to do so. At the end of the day, however, it was the Party's stance that he embraced.

As Bess Lomax Hawes stated, at one point, the group started to gather before each concert and decide which songs to sing for that specific audience. They had to decide how political they would get on the stage. "More and more, we found ourselves substituting an older song repertoire where, we hoped, the next headline would not challenge our entire roster of poetic ideas," she said.²⁶⁸ Woody Guthrie, in the meantime, did not lose anything from his humorous songwriting no matter how awful of a situation they were in. He was as disappointed as Seeger because of the continuous changes that they were supposed to adapt to. However, Bess Lomax said that his frustration stemmed mostly from the fact that they kept losing some of the best songs they wrote just because the political affairs between countries kept changing. He mocked their own situation in a song he named "On Account of That New Situation."

I started out to write a song to the entire population.
But no sooner than I got the words wrote down,
Here come a brand-new situation.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ Seeger, *Pete Seeger in His Own Words*, 113.

²⁶⁸ Hawes, *Sing It Pretty*, 43.

²⁶⁹ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 86.

His approach to politics was as simple as it could get. This new situation did not change his opinions on the Soviet Union or the Communist Party. As the world's best shot against the fascists according to him, the Soviet Union was in need of help more than ever, and the Communist Party was still the biggest and most influential institution to support the unions. Therefore, the only thing he found difficult to adapt was the need to make the necessary adjustments on their repertoire. However, they were not far away from losing the other half of their repertoire (the songs on labor unions) as well.

Apparently, the Communist Party's approach to strikes had started to change at the time. Five days before the invasion of the Soviet Union, William Z. Foster, a prominent figure of the Communist Party, publicly condemned and even attacked President Roosevelt in his *Daily Worker* column about a large strike in California that had stopped almost twenty percent of the entire combat plane production all over the United States. He said that Roosevelt's decision to use the armed forces in order to halt the strike resembled the practices of Nazi Germany. He defined his approach to the strike as "Hitlerite terrorism." Right after the news of invasion spread and the Party started to call for American entrance into war to help the Soviet Union win against the Nazis, they encouraged the unions to try and negotiate their demands with the employers without interrupting the process of production as much as possible. This recommendation from the party leadership would turn into a direct order for unions in the coming months, but for now, the Almanacs were still safe while singing union songs.²⁷⁰

²⁷⁰ Lewy, *The Cause That Failed*, 72; William Z. Foster, *Daily Worker*, June 17, 1941.

On the road from one state to another, rushing from one performance to another, the summer tour of 1941 exhausted the Almanac Singers. Lee Hays was the first one to give up. Due to health issues and lack of energy, he decided to go back home because otherwise he would slow down the rest of the group. Shortly after his separation, when the group was on the West Coast, Millard Lampell decided to stay in Los Angeles with his loved one rather than keeping up with the group as they toured across the nation. As a result, towards the end of the tour, the Almanac Singers were down to a duo once again: Seeger and Guthrie, plus several others that came and went back from time to time.²⁷¹

They eventually completed the tour and went back to New York in fall. Even though they had managed to sing union songs for hundreds of thousands of workers all around the nation, they were aware that they could not stick to union songs forever. To explain why, Dunaway argues that except for Woody Guthrie, none of the members of the group actually belonged to working class and personally experienced the hardships of them. They were making music in the name of a class of society that they only got to know from a certain distance. And this always remained as an obstacle for them to become one with the audience when they played specifically for the union people.²⁷²

One incident played a vital role in the process of the Almanac Singers going back to writing songs with political content: the sinking of USS Reuben James on October 31, 1941, by a German submarine. The soldiers on board whose numbers exceeded a hundred either died or got wounded because of the attack had quite an influence

²⁷¹ Seeger, *Pete Seeger In His Own Words*, 21.

²⁷² Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 92.

especially on Woody Guthrie. In early November, he wrote a song which he gave the ship's name as the title in order to commemorate the first war casualties of the United States even before officially becoming a part of the war. He wanted his listeners to learn about and sympathize with each and every individual who lost their lives on that ship. Therefore, he turned the entire passenger list into an incredibly long song in which he introduced every single person on USS Reuben James on that day.

His motivation was to make the listeners feel like they knew someone on that ship; as if they lost a friend there.²⁷³ However, as much as they liked the idea, Pete Seeger and Millard Lampell found it impossible to perform the song because, naturally, they could not remember the names. All the early attempts of performing the song as a group failed because they kept asking Guthrie questions like "Who was he?" "Which one was that?" "What was his name?" Eventually they decided to add this question to the verse and remove the names.²⁷⁴

Tell me what were their names,
Tell me what were their names,
Did you have a friend on the good Reuben James?²⁷⁵

These lines turned out to be even more striking than telling their names one by one as it revealed a hurtful truth about every war: the names of the soldiers killed would eventually be forgotten and they would just turn into numbers in history books. Towards the end of the song, there are lines that can be interpreted as a call for revenge.

²⁷³ Sørensen, "Almanac Songs and Singers," 38-39; Cray, *Ramblin' Man*, 232.

²⁷⁴ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 98.

²⁷⁵ The Almanac Singers, "The Sinking of the Reuben James," track 4 on *Dear Mr. President*, Keynote Records, 1942.

Now tonight there are lights in our country so bright
In the farms and in the cities they're telling of the fight.
And now our mighty battleships will steam the bounding main
And remember the name of that good Reuben James.²⁷⁶

The lines that suggested American battleships would soon set out towards high seas, and when they did, the memories of USS Reuben James would be on their minds. The song did not specify what kind of a revenge would be taken, when and how it would be done. It just subtly implied that it would not go unanswered. Thus, "The Sinking of the Reuben James" was the first song of the Almanac Singers that contradicted the content of their previous album, *Songs for John Doe*. The song was not released until February 1942, but it was still their first war-related song since their "flip-flop," and there was more to come.

Roosevelt's changing policies to help the Allies, and the sinking of USS Reuben James had already shifted the atmosphere in the country to a certain extent in terms of public opinion on entering the war. However, the incident that left no question marks or lingering thoughts on anybody's minds came on December 7, 1941. The destruction could not be compared to the attack on Reuben James or any other incident. It was by far the deadliest attack on American soil ever. The next day, in the beginning of his speech, Roosevelt described December 7, 1941, as "a date which will live in infamy." And he ended it by requesting war declaration against Japan from the Congress.²⁷⁷

Except for various small minority groups, no major political party or association could openly remain opponent of the war anymore. Years later, when Pete Seeger

²⁷⁶ The Almanac Singers, "The Sinking of the Reuben James."

²⁷⁷ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "'The Day of Infamy' Speech." (speech, New York, December 8, 1941), Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc1986022.afc1986022_ms2201/?st=text.

remembered the day of the attack, he wrote, “Some at the hootenanny²⁷⁸ thought it was just a joke; others, like myself, didn’t even know where, or what Pearl Harbor was, and paid little attention. Maybe it was some Chinese port. Only in the evening I realized what happened: we were at war at last.”²⁷⁹ Although they did not realize at the moment, the Pearl Harbor attack in fact gave the Almanac Singers a free pass for going back to making political songs.²⁸⁰ For months, they had been in a quagmire in which they wanted to support the US entrance into war but were afraid of losing their credibility in the eyes of their audience. Now, they had a much more solid reason to support the war against the Axis powers than just aiding the Soviet Union in their fight against the fascists.

4.2 “Dear Mr. President”

The period between June and December 1941 turned out to be a transition period for the Almanac Singers while the relationship between the Communist Party and the government started to recover after an almost two-year-long reciprocal resentment. Although that chance was long gone, the party’s hopes for a renowned Popular Front flourished once again.²⁸¹ A week after the invasion of the Soviet Union, in the *New Republic*, there were news about how the communists were planning to set up a new united front, but the newspaper argued that everybody “whose memory is good

²⁷⁸ In folk music circles, “hootenanny” was the term used for gatherings of people singing songs and dancing altogether. Cunningham and Friesen, *Red Dust*, 211.

²⁷⁹ Seeger, *Pete Seeger in His Own Words*, 28.

²⁸⁰ Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 216.

²⁸¹ Lewy, *The Cause That Failed*, 65-66.

enough to go back a couple of years” would approach this new stance with doubt.²⁸²

However, Roosevelt would not refuse any additional support when the country was getting closer to being a part of a great war step by step. As an answer to the Communist Party’s olive branch, the government released the leader of the party, Earl Browder, from prison. The government prosecution on communists nationwide stopped. A new popular front was still far away from being created, but at least the government and the communists were back on good terms.²⁸³

At the Almanac House, no peace songs were sung after June, but the group avoided making new songs that directly supported the war efforts of the Soviet Union against Fascists or calling for American entrance into the war in this period. The fact that they did not make any new war-related songs until the sinking of USS Reuben James can be interpreted as a patriotic stance. Although they were blamed for being pawns of the Communist Party, or sometimes directly labeled as “communist entertainers,” their stance in the period between the invasion of the Soviet Union and the Pearl Harbor attack may prove otherwise.

As soon as the United States officially entered the war, the Almanac Singers started working on making new songs that would sometimes fuel the patriotic feelings of their listeners or sometimes just mock the Axis powers. Only a week after the attack, in a hootenanny, they introduced some of their new songs with their audience as “a preview of our new Anti-Axis album of songs.”²⁸⁴ As the group started focusing on

²⁸² Isserman, *Which Side Were You On*, 110-111.

²⁸³ James Ryan, *Earl Browder: The Failure of American Communism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 205.

²⁸⁴ Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A life*, 217.

making new songs; in the meantime, they lost the only remaining half of their previous repertoire, which were the union songs. At least, that is what they believed at the moment. Many of the songs in the *Talking Union* album would come into popularity once again in the coming years, but when the Communist Party asked unions for a no-strike pledge and the two largest labor unions of the time, American Federation of Labor (AFL) and Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) agreed to this call, the union songs of the Almanac Singers that encouraged workers to fight for their rights and try every possible way to achieve it including striking were rendered obsolete.²⁸⁵

As the war atmosphere quickly intensified, the people who did not obey the unions' no-strike policy were labeled as the "agents of Hitler," and Earl Browder proudly defined himself as a strikebreaker "at a time like this."²⁸⁶ Those who did not follow the no-strike line were the Trotskyist members of the Socialist Workers Party, which was the virtually only remaining political party at the time that still opposed the war even after Pearl Harbor. As a result, they became the target of the Communist Party and the government together. As the communists blamed them for hiding their true identities under the false name of "socialism" just like the German "Nationalist Socialist Workers Party" that was ruining the world under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, the government implemented harsh persecutions on them as well.²⁸⁷

Losing their union songs encouraged the Almanac Singers only to work harder and make more songs. When Pete Seeger described the early days of 1942, he said that

²⁸⁵ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 94.

²⁸⁶ Earl Browder, "The Strike Wave Conspiracy," *Communist* (June 1943): 486.

²⁸⁷ Jaffe, *Rise and Fall of American Communism*, 50.

they were somehow doing well although the Almanac Singers were looser and bigger than ever before. It was bigger because there were continuously new additions to the group, and they became more and more crowded. On the other hand, it was looser than before because almost none of those new members actually contributed to the group by arranging new events or writing new songs. Instead, they were mostly there only for the live performances. With Lee Hays having left the group and Millard Lampell in the very background, the group's songwriting responsibility was solely on Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie. However, the duo was so creative and so productive that they quickly made the Almanac Singers "the first major group of entertainers turning out war propaganda in New York," as Joe Klein described them. And soon, their popularity would exceed the borders of New York.²⁸⁸

As a strong wave of patriotism swept the nation, the Almanac Singers put out a great effort into taking their part in the fight with their music. Woody Guthrie went back over some of his most popular tunes to see if he could turn any of them into a war song. At the end, he came up with a new version of "Dusty Old Dust," which was by far the most popular Dust Bowl song of him. This time in the verses he sang:

So long, it's been good to know yuh,
So long, it's been good to know yuh,
So long, it's been good to know yuh,
There's a mighty big war that's got to be won,
And we'll get back together again.²⁸⁹

The theme of the original song was about lovers saying farewell to each other because they had to part their ways due to the dust storms hitting their homes. Therefore, Guthrie did not have to change the theme entirely. It was still a farewell

²⁸⁸ Seeger, *Pete Seeger In His Own Words*, 22; Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 217.

²⁸⁹ Woody Guthrie, "So Long, It's Been Good to Know You (WWII version), recorded in 1942, track 9 on *Hard Travelin': The Asch Recordings, Vol. 3*, Smithsonian Folkways, 1999.

song, but only this time the reason the lovers said goodbye to each other was the war. The man in the song goes running to the army hall as soon as he receives the call for army just like all other people in his hometown. And he sees all men are saying goodbye to their loved ones.²⁹⁰ Woody Guthrie used the same lines that suggested young men rushing to the army hall after being called for military service in another song, “Sally Don’t You Grieve,” in order to show the unity and dedication of people for the war efforts, whereas in the song “Billy Boy” in their previous album, young Billy had said that he had no desire to take part in the fight, nor the skill to kill anyone else because he was “a young boy and cannot leave his mother.”²⁹¹ Many Young Billy boys were now “running like a cannonball” to the army hall as soon as they got the call.

I’m gonna cross that ocean wide
Army rifle by my side
When Hitler’s beat you can be my bride
But I told her not to grieve after me.²⁹²

The same farewell theme is in the center of this song as well. As the young man is about to go into war, he tells his girlfriend Sally not to grieve after him because they will eventually come together. In this context, the existence of Hitler can be seen as an obstacle in front of every positive aspect of life, even the smallest things like two young people’s marriage. Therefore, a great importance is attributed to Hitler’s defeat. The man is already going overseas to achieve this, but he also tells his girlfriend to do her part in this struggle. He tells her to get a job, save money and work hard for the United States. Only after this advice, he remembers to tell her

²⁹⁰ Young and Young, *Music of the World War II Era*, 168-169.

²⁹¹ The Almanac Singers, “Billy Boy.”

²⁹² Woody Guthrie, “Sally, Don’t You Grieve,” recorded in 1942, track 16 on *Hard Travelin’: Asch Recordings, Vol. 3*, Smithsonian Folkways, 1999.

“Write me a letter about every day.” The order of his advice can be understood as an order of importance. He puts the well-being of his country in front of himself, his girlfriend, and their relationship. And this was not the only song of Guthrie in which the fascists were an obstacle in front of young lovers getting married:

I’ll grab a cannon ball or two,
I’ll drive an airplane through the blue,
I’ll win this war, and when I’m through,
Wedding bells will ring for me and you.

Ed Cray criticizes this song, “Beat Mister Hitler Blues,” for sounding too artificial just like the huge majority of war songs made by countless of other American musicians at the time. Although its musical value was open for dispute, it is still significant in terms of its content because it also shows us how much more militarist Guthrie became step by step in a period of less than two months. The first-person narration in the song can be interpreted as Guthrie’s identification of himself as a soldier fighting this war.²⁹³

“Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done” was another song of Guthrie that he revisited soon after Pearl Harbor. While it was just one of the hundreds of songs he wrote during the Thirties, the revised lyrics of this new version of the song is another indication of how much importance Guthrie attributed to the fight against Hitler. Just like the “Beat Mister Hitler Blues,” in this song, there is a first-person narration. The narrator says that he has worked in the Garden of Eden and picked apples from the forbidden tree. From there, he has taken part in the building of the pyramids and the Tower of Babel. He has defeated Nero’s army in less than thirty minutes. He has been there when the American Revolution took place, and then almost a hundred

²⁹³ Cray, *Ramblin’ Man*, 234.

years later in the Civil War to do away with institutionalized slavery. At the end, he eventually faces the biggest challenge:

There was a man across the ocean, I guess you knew him well,
His name was Adolf Hitler, goddamn his soul to hell.
We kicked him in the panzers and put him on the run,
And that was about the biggest thing that man has ever done.²⁹⁴

The narrator, who has been there to witness the entire human history from the building of Egyptian pyramids to the Civil War of the United States, claims that Hitler's defeat would be the greatest accomplishment that humankind has ever achieved so far.

With the American entrance into war, American communists were once again able to make their voices heard without any governmental or social pressure on them, a situation which could be described as the "joy of being accepted by all."²⁹⁵ As the most popular music group that was widely known to be communist, the Almanac Singers also started to enjoy the increasing support for their works. The groups of people they started to sing for in live performances became more crowded, and this rising popularity caught the attention of other people in the entertainment industry. While the concert halls that the group performed at got bigger and bigger, in January 1942, the Keynote Records company, who previously was too concerned about the harsh anti-war content of the Almanac songs and refused to officially publish their album, contacted the group once again and offered them to bring the war songs they had been working on together and turn them into an album by suggesting that "Now

²⁹⁴ Woody Guthrie, "The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done," recorded in 1942, track 17 on *This Land Is Your Land: Asch Recordings, Vol. 1*, Smithsonian Folkways, 1997.

²⁹⁵ Bella Dodd, *School of Darkness* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1954), 138.

is our chance to make it up with Franklin Roosevelt, who is really not such a bad guy.”²⁹⁶

There is no known record of what Roosevelt thought about them in return, but it was known that the First Lady listened to and liked some of their war songs very much. In a letter from Alan Lomax to Woody Guthrie, dated January 21, 1941, he wrote him, “I played the Almanac songs the other day for Mrs. Roosevelt, and she thought they were swell, and asked for copies of the records.” He continued to say that she wanted to play the songs for the staff working at the Office of Civilian Defense, and that it was probable that the fame of the Almanac Singers would soon spread.

Foreseeing the possibility of the group’s rising popularity, Alan Lomax immediately warned them about their anti-war past. He recommended the group to change their name immediately and leave “the Almanac Singers” in the past, otherwise their anti-war past would be a serious trouble for them. Considering the persecutions that the war opposing Socialist Workers Party members faced, their anti-war songs could have easily been labeled as treasonous and damage their rising reputation completely.²⁹⁷ While Guthrie immediately started thinking of new names for the group, Pete Seeger refused by telling the group and Lomax that if they changed their name, that would be the real problem for them because it could easily suggest being ashamed of their past, which he was not. While Lomax suggested them to find a new, “good old countrified name like ‘Oklahoma Rangers’ or something of that sort,” Seeger convinced the group that they did not need to hide their past as they had

²⁹⁶ Seeger, *Pete Seeger In His Own Words*, 23.

²⁹⁷ Szwed, *The Man Who Recorded*, 190; Sørensen, “Almanac Songs and Singers,” 43.

solid reasons to oppose the war before, and now they had solid reasons to support it.²⁹⁸

In January 1942, CBS Radio contacted the group and invited them for Norman Corwin's program *This is War*, which was the first major radio program series on America's war efforts. The program was sponsored by all of the four major broadcasting networks in the United States, so the Almanac Singers sang their war songs, which Pete Seeger called "win-the-war songs," to the entire country that day, reaching approximately thirty million people. Soon, they were invited for another program on CBS, *We the People*. Since the programs they appeared on radio turned out to be a big hit, they were even offered a daily morale-builder radio show of their own in which they could sing their songs and have small talks about the war. However, that never happened because of the ghost of their past that would be revealed nationwide soon.²⁹⁹

In February 1942, exactly ten months after their strictly anti-war album *Songs for John Doe*, the Almanac Singers released their new album under the title of *Dear Mr. President*, consisting of six war songs including the already famous "Sinking of the Reuben James." By the time the album was released, the group had been writing and singing songs supporting the war efforts of the United States for more than two months. However, with the album's release they drew nationwide attention. While

²⁹⁸ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 96.

²⁹⁹ James Spiller, "This is War!: Network Radio and World War II Propaganda in America," *Journal of Radio Studies* 11, no. 1 (2009): 55; Seeger, *Pete Seeger In His Own Words*, 22-23; Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 217.

the pieces in their previous anti-war album was criticized as “propaganda songs,” the same critics this time defined the style of *Dear Mr. President* as “patriotic art.”³⁰⁰

The first track in the album, “Belt Line Girl” resembles Woody Guthrie’s “Sally, Don’t You Grieve” and revised version of “So Long, It’s Been Good to Know You” in terms of their content. This time, we listen to the very similar farewell scene of lovers from a woman’s perspective:

I stood on the station platform
And looked at the lonesome track.
The train had gone around the curve.
The train that might never come back
For it carried my soldier sweetheart away.³⁰¹

If these first lines had belonged to a song of the Almanac Singers written a year ago, it would have been yet another upsetting example of how war separated young lovers with a possibility of never coming back together again. However, in “Belt Line Girl,” after these lines, the woman narrator of the song says she did not cry although she was sad because she has a lot of work to do. It is because she needs to fill the position of his lover at the factory since he is abroad fighting the fascists.

Joe had gone to the fighting front and he left his job behind,
Now I must step into his place on the long assembly line.
I said I’ll learn to build a ship, I’ll learn to build a plane
For the faster we speed this belt line, girls
The quicker our boys return.³⁰²

There is no hopelessness, no darkness, or any sorrow in the content of the song as the target of the Almanac Singers is not to scare the audience of the concept of war, but on the contrary, motivate them for it. In the first half of the song, the narrator

³⁰⁰ Young and Young, *Music of the World War II Era*, 4; Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 98.

³⁰¹ The Almanac Singers, “Belt Line Girl,” track 1 on *Dear Mr. President*, Keynote Records, 1942.

³⁰² Ibid.

motivates the other women by saying that they need to work harder so that their lovers can come back home earlier. In the second half, she looks at the war from a broader perspective and says that the enemy is not far away; it is right there at the gates. She says, “Go ask the widows of the Pearl Harbor boys” if need be for proof. As the men leave their jobs to go and fight the enemies, women have to fill in at the vacant positions, otherwise the factories would slow down, she says. Only when “a thousand hard working girls step in and take a hand” in order to continue the production of new tanks, planes and guns, then “there’s freedom in the land.”³⁰³

“Deliver the Goods” has a similar content that this war cannot be won without the united effort of everyone no matter what their gender, age, or job is, including “the butcher and the baker and the clerk in the store, the guys who sail the ships, and the guys who run the trains, and the farmer raising wheat upon the Kansas plains.”

While such encouragement of the unity of all people constitutes the main message of the song, there is a specific part in which the Almanac Singers sound almost opposing to labor unions:

Now, me and my boss, we never did agree
If a thing helped him then it didn’t help me
But when a burglar tries to bust into your house
You stop fighting with the landlord and throw him out.³⁰⁴

Less than a year ago, in their song “Talking Union,” the same group addressed the workers and said that if they leave things up to the decision of their boss, they will wait until the judgment day since bosses would always find an excuse for making them work overtime until their employees faint. No matter what they say, the

³⁰³ The Almanac Singers, “Belt Line Girl.”

³⁰⁴ The Almanac Singers, “Deliver the Goods,” track 3 on *Dear Mr. President*, Keynote Records, 1942.

Almanacs advised, employees have to find a way to organize and fight for their rights.³⁰⁵ And now, in “Deliver the Goods,” the first-person narrator who is a worker says that he works overtime because the President said they “gotta crank up the factories,” so he is working as much as he can to do so. Even though he has never agreed with his boss on anything, this is not the right time to fight against the boss, he says. In the lines quoted above, the group suggests that the workers (tenants, in this analogy) and the bosses (landlords) need to stop fighting each other because there is a burglar at the house. And that burglar is nobody but Hitler.

“Side by Side” is another song that the Almanacs used analogies to emphasize the importance of unity in the current situation they were in. The song is about eight men living in the same house in peace until one of them one day decides to break bad. “I’ll get stronger than the rest” he says, then starts stealing and cheating. As the other dwellers of the house remain silent, he continues to harm them more severely. Finally, one day he kills three of them. Only after their friends lost their lives because of this man, the other four decides to unite.

He murdered three and wanted more
He turned upon the other four.
But when this murder he did try
He found them standing side by side.
Side by side they fought that day
They left his bones to rot away.³⁰⁶

Even though seven of them could have prevented all these from happening, it took the loss of three lives until they decided to come together and take the issue seriously, just like the world being silent for a long time while fascism rose to power and eventually Hitler took over most of Europe. Only then the world realized that it

³⁰⁵ The Almanac Singers, “Talking Union.”

³⁰⁶ The Almanac Singers, “Side by Side,” track 6 on *Dear Mr. President*, Keynote Records, 1942.

was an issue they had to fight altogether against. Just like all other songs in the album, “Side by Side” ends with a very hopeful message: the remaining four unites and stops the aggressor because, as the last line suggests, “one was weak but four were strong.” This was also the first of several songs that they later made with a similar content that praised unity and cooperation of nations against the fascists.³⁰⁷

“Dear Mr. President,” also the song that gave the album its name, is sung by Pete Seeger in the style of what they called talking blues. Since the song is written from a first-person point of view, and only Seeger’s voice is heard from the beginning until the end, it gives the listener such a feeling as if Seeger sits down and talks to the President in a pretty calm manner. Before getting to the lyrics, even the title itself tells us a lot about the group’s sudden change of stance, considering how they had addressed the president in their previous songs.

Although both music and lyrics of all the songs they recorded and released were credited collectively under the name of the Almanac Singers in order to keep the anonymity of individuals, it was known that both “Dear Mr. President” in this album and “Washington Breakdown” in their 1941 album *Songs for John Doe* were written by Pete Seeger. Moreover, while they sang most of their songs altogether as a group, both of these songs were sung by Pete Seeger because they were written from the first-person point of view of an ordinary man.³⁰⁸ In “Washington Breakdown,” Seeger addressed the president by his first name in quite an aggressive manner: “Franklin D., listen to me! You ain’t a-gonna send me ‘cross the sea.”³⁰⁹ While this

³⁰⁷ The Almanac Singers, “Side by Side.”

³⁰⁸ Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 192.

³⁰⁹ The Almanac Singers, “Washington Breakdown.”

way of addressing the president contains a certain contempt and disrespect towards him, ten months later, Seeger seems to understand his “mistake,” and thus he starts “Dear Mr. President” with these lines: “Dear Mr. President, I set me down and send you greetings from my hometown.”

From the beginning until the very end, the entire song can be interpreted as an apology from the president, an explanation for Seeger’s past thoughts and behaviors, and justification of the change of these thoughts. At the beginning, the narrator introduces himself to the president by saying he is an ordinary guy who worked most of his life. Then he starts talking about how he hates Hitler because he has caused lots of good people to die; therefore, he finds it crucial for them to unite and take him down.

Now Mr. President, we haven’t always agreed in the past, I know
But that ain’t at all important now.
What is important is what we got to do.
We got to lick Mr. Hitler, and until we do
Other things can wait.³¹⁰

Even though the narrator is “an ordinary guy who worked most of his life,” here in these lines he sounds so much like Pete Seeger himself admitting they haven’t always been on good terms with the president. However, now that they have this common problem, they can put other problems on hold until they can solve the Hitler problem first in cooperation. In fact, these lines can be interpreted in a broader context than just the relationship between Seeger and the president. It summarizes the relationship between the government and the communists at the time with great accuracy. Then, he goes on to say things that the Pete Seeger of 1941 would definitely be angry at as he would find it just another meaningless excuse for

³¹⁰ The Almanac Singers, “Dear Mr. President,” track 2 on *Dear Mr. President*, Keynote Records, 1942.

unimproved working conditions: “War means overtime and higher prices, but we’re all willing to make sacrifices.” Towards the end, he says that he even stopped playing the banjo with his friends and he wants to exchange his instrument for “something that makes more noise.” The specific choice of instrument to mention in these lines is another indication of how he actually talks about himself while singing the song as “an ordinary man.”³¹¹

After declaring his intention to swap his instrument, on which he previously wrote “This Machine Surrounds Hate and Forces It to Surrender,” for a weapon, this is how Seeger ends the song: “So what I want is you to give me a gun, so we can hurry up and get the job done.” These lines are the early hints of Seeger planning to join the army as he believed -according to the song- that they would be free, and America would have a chance to become a better place only after Hitler’s defeat, and everyone had to do their part to achieve this goal.³¹²

Although “Dear Mr. President” was the song that the Almanacs attributed most importance on (so as to name the album after it), the most popular song of the album turned to be “Round and Round Hitler’s Grave.” The song’s cheerful tone (which actually contradicts the use of graphic language such as hanging Mussolini or boiling Hitler in hot oil) made it a decent example of war-time morale builder product of the entertainment industry. While mocking the German army because they attempted to invade Russia in search of oil and the army general staff led to his troops to go hundreds of miles in one day after getting the directions wrong, the song praises the Russian and American armies. First the Russian army is going to chase him back to

³¹¹ The Almanac Singers, “Dear Mr. President.”

³¹² Ibid.

Berlin all the way from Moscow, and then the American army would go “‘round and ‘round Hitler’s grave,” take him down so he would never be able to get up. Then, the song mentions possible alternatives to kill Hitler and Mussolini. Even though the Almanacs could not successfully guess the “Hitler’s grave” part as he never really had a grave, they did have one accurate prophecy about Mussolini’s end:

Mussolini won’t last long
Tell you the reason why
We’re gonna salt his beef
And hang it up to dry.³¹³

Benito Mussolini would indeed be hung by his feet in a public square in Milano three years later. “Round and Round Hitler’s Grave” became so rapidly famous that the Almanacs were asked to take part in various radio shows being broadcast nationwide just to perform this song. As Pete Seeger himself recalled years later, it became the first ever folk song to be played on nationwide radio channels over and over again during the war.³¹⁴

In February, while the group was busy with the newly released album’s promotional events and radio programs, they were offered to work on a new album to be released under the label of the famous Decca Records. All kinds of people from all over the country were now listening to the Almanac Singers. However, this sudden burst of popularity would blow out even faster. Along with some of the other members, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger had already been being followed for a long time, but this rapid change of stance and the possible reasons laying underneath caught the FBI’s attention, and their efforts to disgrace the duo (and the band overall) paid off

³¹³ The Almanac Singers, “Round and Round Hitler’s Grave,” track 5 on *Dear Mr. President*, Keynote Records, 1942.

³¹⁴ Cunningham and Friesen, *Red Dust*, 213; *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*.

successfully. One article after another appeared on various magazines and newspapers scrutinizing the group's anti-Roosevelt and anti-war past. Thus, the Almanac Singers, whose popularity rose to nationwide number one in early February, were reduced to nearly nothing by the end of the same month.³¹⁵

4.3 From Singers to Soldiers

It was not the first time the Almanac Singers were accused of being unpatriotic communists who put the interests of the Soviet Union in front of everything else. However, the earlier accusations did not have almost any impact on the credibility of the group as their target audience already consisted heavily of communist, leftist, and unionist circles. Now that their war songs had listeners from all political views, the same allegations had a much more profound effect on the perception of the group in the eyes of the people.³¹⁶ The scrutiny was carried out by two largely effective bodies in terms of creating new perceptions or changing the already existing ones: the government (the Federal Bureau of Investigation, to be more specific) and the press.

On February 17, 1942, the headline of the *New York Post* read "Peace Choir Changes Tune," and the article written under the same title by Robert Stephens claimed that the people who invited the Almanacs to their radio shows were "entirely unaware of the singers' background."³¹⁷ On the very same day, the *World Telegram* included

³¹⁵ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 95, 101-102.

³¹⁶ Bert Alan Spector, "Wasn't That a Time?: Pete Seeger and the Anti-Communist Crusade, 1940-1968," (PhD diss., University of Missouri, 1977), 32.

³¹⁷ Robert J. Stephens, "Peace Choir Changes Tune," *New York Post*, February 17, 1942, 1.

another article: “Singers on New Morale Show Also Warbled for Communists.” Just like the article written by Stephens, in *World Telegram*’s news, there was an emphasis on how the group used to have an utterly different political stance that no one was aware of, completely ignoring the fact that the Almanac Singers did nothing to hide their past although they had been warned about it.³¹⁸

Not the Almanac Singers, but the Keynote Records did a lot to hide the group’s past. Despite their efforts to keep themselves legally out of trouble by releasing the group’s 1941 anti-war album *Songs for John Doe* under the label of Almanac Records rather than Keynote, their offices were still raided by the FBI in the early spring of 1942. It was later understood that as soon as the group changed its stance in the summer of 1941, Keynote Records had stopped selling the album, collected all existing copies of it and destroyed them along with the entire records in their studios. This immediately caused the Decca Records to withdraw their offer about working together with the Almanacs for a new album.³¹⁹

The ink on the contracts wasn’t even dry when a front-page story appeared in a “liberal” New York City newspaper attacking the Almanacs. The article saw something strange in that “Peace Singers” had become “War Minstrels”. . . as though millions of other Americans hadn’t gone the same change as fascism advanced.

Years later, Agnes Cunningham and Gordon Friesen defended the Almanac Singers with these lines by arguing the Almanacs were not the only ones to change their stance at the time, but still they were almost “blacklisted,” and in a way they experienced “McCarthyism long before Joe McCarthy.”³²⁰ In the coming months,

³¹⁸ Carl Joachim Friedrich, “Singers on New Morale Show Also Warbled for Communists,” *World Telegram*, February 17, 1942, 3.

³¹⁹ Sørensen, “Almanac Songs and Singers,” 36; Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 102.

³²⁰ Cunningham and Friesen, *Red Dust*, 222.

several other news articles continued to be published to tear down the group's public reputation. However, the ones appeared on newspapers in February alone were enough to cause the Almanacs to lose their popularity in the public eye.

From that point on, just going back to its roots and starting to sing for their small audience consisting of unionists and communists was not an option for the Almanac Singers either because they had turned their back on the group as well, or forced to do so, now that they were on the war supporting side. Even the most communist-friendly club owners preferred not to have the Almanacs on the stage of their places as it could easily lead to certain misunderstandings. To describe the situation, Pete Seeger said, "we were orphans. There was no organization that really made themselves responsible for us." On the other hand, as none of the leading members of the band were officially members of the Communist Party, it was not surprising nor hard to understand for the party to prefer looking away rather than looking after them.³²¹

Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie's popularity did not fade away completely, but they did not have almost any bookings as a group anymore. The ones who called for bookings specifically asked for Seeger and Guthrie to come perform rather than a group performance under the name of the Almanac Singers. In June 1942, Pete Seeger was called for military duty. One year later, he wrote on his diary that he felt "almost glad" when he heard about being called for the army because at that time, he felt as if he was carrying the entire responsibility of the group all by himself. Thus, army was his way out of this quagmire. Years later, towards the end of the war, in a

³²¹ Richard A. Reuss and Joanne C. Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2000), 238; Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 103.

letter he sent to his wife, Toshi Seeger, he wrote that one of the reasons why he joined the army so willingly was the fact that he was “having more and more failure musically.”³²²

A few months after Seeger, several other members of the group started to take more active part in the war efforts. Some of them moved to Detroit for a fresh beginning with the hopes of starting a new Almanac Singers branch there. Woody Guthrie came together with three of his fellow folk musicians who also took part in the Almanac Singers concerts in several occasions and formed a new group under the name the Headline Singers, which turned out to be pretty short-lived. He continued to write war songs and sing them in special events since he considered this as his way of fighting against the fascists.³²³

As his hatred of fascists intensified, Guthrie started to romanticize the war more and more. In a letter he wrote to his wife Marjorie in early 1943, he stated that he believed this war would be the solution to all the problems that the world had been trying to solve for “twenty-five million years.” Once the free world came victorious over the fascists, all kinds of racism and hate would come to an end according to him: “This war is going to give . . . everybody of every race and color an equal place to work and live equal, under the sun.”³²⁴ In his song titled “When the Yanks Go Marching In,” he wrote that he wanted to be in the army when American guns and cannons started roaring, when their tanks went rolling, and when their planes

³²² Seeger, *Pete Seeger in His Own Words*, 28; Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 115.

³²³ Serge R. Denisoff, “Take It Easy, But Take It: The Almanac Singers,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 83 no. 327 (1970): 23; Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 244-245.

³²⁴ Woody Guthrie to Marjorie Guthrie, January 1943, Woody Guthrie Manuscript Collection 1935-1950, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

dominated the sky because he wanted to be one of those people who “set this whole world free.”³²⁵

Soon enough he did become one of those people; he joined the Merchant Marine in June 1943. Although he wrote to his wife that he was planning to use his “gun part of the time, a hand grenade some of the time, a guitar some of the time and a typewriter some of the time to fight with,” the U.S. army mostly benefited from his musical skills as a great balladeer and morale-builder rather than a fighter in the field.³²⁶

Their trans-Atlantic voyages were still full of dangers; during his military service the ships he was in got torpedoed twice in total, and once they even had to send Guthrie back to the United States to receive medical treatment.³²⁷ When the FBI files on Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie were finally publicized decades later, it was understood that Woody Guthrie, his motivation and dedication as a member of the Merchant Marine was not questioned or investigated much, especially when compared to Seeger.³²⁸ He never officially accepted or refused the allegations for being a member of the Communist Party, but it was evident in his songs and his letters to his family that the motivation to fight and take down the fascists overwhelmed his ideology. This was not the case with Pete Seeger.

When Seeger first joined the army, the Military Intelligence Division of the War Department investigated him thoroughly and concluded that he had “possibilities of

³²⁵ Woody Guthrie, “When the Yanks Go Marching In,” recorded in 1943, track 23 on *Hard Travelin’: The Asch Recordings, Vol. 3*, Smithsonian Folkways, 1999.

³²⁶ Woody Guthrie to Marjorie Guthrie, January 1943, Woody Guthrie Manuscript Collection 1935-1950, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³²⁷ Seeger, *The Incomplete Folksinger*, 49.

³²⁸ Leonards, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau*, 71-72.

divided loyalty to the extent that a change in the Communist Party line would result in potential subversion.” It is not surprising for the government officials to come to this conclusion after investigating the swings of political stance he went through from the late Thirties to Pearl Harbor and how they were in complete alignment with the stance of the Communist Party, but they were at least convinced about his loyalty at the time and his desire to contribute to the war efforts as much as he could.³²⁹

Seeger’s ideology and previous deeds were not the only points that raised question marks on certain minds. Although he had been trained as an aviation mechanic and he was supposed to be sent overseas for active duty now, his deployment notice kept getting delayed. He suspected that the reason was the fact he was married to a Japanese-American woman. He was right, indeed. In the related FBI investigation files, it was written that it was probable that Seeger would be “further influenced along questionable lines by his new wife, the former Toshi Ohta, who is half-Japanese.” Since she was also interested in politics and a communist like Pete Seeger himself, the report concluded that their marriage could possibly “strengthen their individual radical tendencies,” and that was why he was not found fit for a critical position in active combat.³³⁰ Soon, he was sent to Saipan, an island in the middle of the South Pacific, his duty being raising the spirits of wounded soldiers by singing war songs to them.³³¹ In the 1942 song of the Almanac Singers, “Dear Mr. President,” Seeger wrote these lines:

³²⁹ Military Intelligence Division, *Military Intelligence Report on Pete Seeger*, by 1st Lt. Wm. H. Wise, Washington, D.C., 1943.

³³⁰ David Corn, “Pete Seeger’s FBI File Reveals How the Folk Legend First Became a Target of the Feds,” *Mother Jones*, accessed April 22, 2020. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/12/pete-seeger-fbi-file>.

³³¹ Leonards, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau*, 88.

Now, Mr. President, you're commander-in-chief of our armed forces,
Ships and planes, and the tanks and horses.
I guess you know best just where I can fight.
All I want to be is situated right
To do the most damage.³³²

This was how he had addressed the President in the song months before joining the army. Considering how he was never assigned in a position in which he would take part in active combat, these lines in the song can be interpreted as a foreshadowing of what he would be saying to the president if he had the chance.

In time, Seeger somehow proved the doubts about him right because he did not remain silent when he saw something that he thought was wrong, while unquestioning loyalty and dedication was expected from him. This was one of the major differences between Seeger's and Guthrie's characteristics and their adoption of ideologies. Both men lived as free spirits for all their lives, not committing themselves unquestioningly for any organization, institution, or ideology. However, Woody Guthrie managed not to worry himself by overthinking on these things, and he could accept at least some of the policies or practices of the larger bodies he was part of (officially or emotionally). On the other hand, Seeger could never keep his silence on such occasions.

While Guthrie was able to joke on how they could not sing their peace songs anymore because of the new situation developing between the Russians and the Germans, it devastated Seeger to the extent that his friends at the Almanac House witnessed him sobbing in his room because no one would care about what they would say or believe in what they would sing about.³³³ While Woody Guthrie wrote

³³² The Almanac Singers, "Dear Mr. President."

³³³ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 105.

the war songs with quite an aggressive language (such as praising the Russian sniper Lyudmilla Pavlichenko for killing more than three hundred Nazis in his song “Miss Pavlichenko,” or resembling hundreds of dead bodies of Nazis in the battleground to yellow leaves and brown grass flying on the ground in fall season in his song “Ice in My Whiskers”), the songs Seeger wrote included rather subtle messages and analogies (such as “Dear Mr. President,” “Side by Side” and “Deliver the Goods” on their 1942 album).³³⁴

Therefore, Seeger could not help but say a few words when he heard about the Japanese internment camps. The communist press mostly defended it as they considered it as a “necessary war measure” because of the so-called practices of sabotage that Japanese Americans exercised such as work stoppages, strikes and slowdowns.³³⁵ Woody Guthrie’s stance on the issue is unknown because he was so focused on “making up songs against Hitler and fascism, homemade and imported” at the time.³³⁶ Pete Seeger, despite still being an army officer at the time, sent a letter to the California chapter of the American legion and wrote that he felt “disgusted” upon hearing the news of internment camps and the voting in favor of deportation of the Japanese after the war. “If you bar from citizenship descendants of Japanese, why not descendants of English? After all, we once fought with them, too,” he wrote along with some other lines emphasizing his disturbance about the situation. He finally ended the letter by saying that “America is great and strong as she is because we have so far been a haven to all oppressed,” rather than being one of the

³³⁴ Wrinkler, *Music of World War II*, 86; Jones, *The Songs That Fought the War*, 93.

³³⁵ “Dies Pokes Nose into Relocation Center,” *Daily Worker*, December 3, 1943; Foner, “Why Is There No Socialism,” 73.

³³⁶ Denisoff, *Great Day Coming*, 91; Kaufman, *Mapping Woody Guthrie*, 75.

oppressors. He did not adjust his stance on the issue according to what the Communist Party had stated; instead, he did what he believed was right. In return, a few more pages were added to his FBI investigation files.³³⁷

To conclude, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, the Communist Party USA, what was left from the Almanac Singers, and the United States government remained on the same side of the war until it ended with the victory of the Allies. Guthrie and the Detroit branch of the Almanac Singers even made some songs to support Roosevelt on his 1944 election campaign as he prepared for his fourth term in the office. It was also the last time that all these people were on the same side, supporting the same causes. Once World War II came to an end, and the first signs of a cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union became evident; Seeger, Guthrie, and the Communist Party parted their ways with the US government never to cross ever again.

³³⁷ Corn, "Pete Seeger's FBI File Reveals."

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Swap my rifle for a farm...
Trade my helmet for a sweetheart.³³⁸

Quit playing this banjo around with the boys
And exchange it for something that makes more noise.³³⁹

In its shortest summary, this thesis is the study of how Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger's perception of war evolved from wishing to swap their rifles and helmets for farms and lovers to demanding guns from the president in exchange for their banjos and guitars. The emergence of the Popular Front promoted and popularized two previously underestimated and sometimes marginalized concepts, and it introduced them to ordinary Americans. Those two concepts were communism and folk music. As fellow travelers of the communist ideology and two legendary figures of American folk music, Seeger and Guthrie naturally took their parts right in the center of this study.

³³⁸ Woody Guthrie, "More War News," quoted in Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, 132.

³³⁹ The Almanac Singers, "Dear Mr. President."

Although the two men came from different regions of the United States, from different families and economic conditions, what brought them together was their ideologies and passion for music. These two key points always remained as the defining features of them throughout their lives. From time to time, some even claimed that they were more politicians than musicians, and their ideology was the primary element that brought them recognition and reputation on an international scale even though Seeger definitely refused such claims. Guthrie, on the other hand, did not actually care about such claims, and he never said a word against the rumors accusing him of acting like a politician.³⁴⁰ As a result, no matter what everyone thought about them or accused them of, Seeger and Guthrie were and still are the first two names that come to people's minds when American folk music is mentioned.

For all these reasons, the approach of these two men towards such a remarkable phenomenon as World War II mattered a lot. In addition, what mattered even more was their political swings at the time. This is precisely the point where this study contributes to the already existing debates on the triangle of American folk music, communism and World War II. The primary purpose of this study was to see how much in alignment was the political stance of these two fellow travelers with the Communist Party USA from the late Thirties when their political awareness first took its shape until the entrance of the United States into the war. An extensive research on primary and secondary sources related to Guthrie and Seeger and an analysis of the songs they wrote in this period indicated that they, in fact, followed

³⁴⁰ Noah Berlatsky, "Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie: More Politicians Than Musicians," *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2012; Seeger, *Pete Seeger in His Own Words*, 113; Edgmon and Logsdon, *Woody's Road*, 113.

the party line quite closely, almost without missing a beat, one could say. Although they maintained their distance with the party in official terms and did not release any war songs in between the period from June to December 1941, several autobiographical works revealed that their “flip-flop” from opposing the war to supporting it took place before Pearl Harbor.

One of the biggest challenges in this study has been the contradicting statements on various vital points such as Seeger and Guthrie’s membership status of the Communist Party USA, which turned out to be a confusing issue when several different sources had different claims about it. It is known that neither of them was a member of the party during the period that this thesis focuses on. However, for example, Guthrie once claimed that signing up for the Communist Party in 1936 was one of the best things he did in his entire life even though there was no such official record of it. The same Guthrie, years later, said that he was never a member of “any earthly organization.”³⁴¹ On the other hand, there is at least an agreement on the fact that at some point in his life, Pete Seeger became an official member of the party. However, his case has its fair share of ambiguity as well. While quite a few sources claimed that he became officially affiliated with the party as early as his college days, Seeger himself wrote that he only became a member of the party after his return home in 1945 until he decided to resign four years later.³⁴²

The history of the Almanac Singers is a whole different cluster of inconsistent information as the group itself was pretty dispersed. There were so many folksingers

³⁴¹ Ed Robbin, *Woody Guthrie and Me: An Intimate Reminiscence* (Berkeley: Lancaster-Miller Publishers, 1970), 133; J. Shepherd, “Woody Guthrie’s Gift to American Culture,” *People’s World*, January 9, 2012; Cray, *Ramblin’ Man*, 189.

³⁴² Seeger, *Pete Seeger in His Own Words*, 92.

between the years 1941 and 1943 that called themselves the Almanac Singers that it is actually not surprising that various sources provided either directly incorrect, or at least not completely accurate information about the group. Lee Hays once said that the history of the Almanac Singers would never be accurately written because there were “so many versions and interpretations as there were Almanac singers.”³⁴³

Another major challenge has been the overlooking of some facts that constituted the key points of this thesis, namely the change of political stance of Seeger and Guthrie from June 1941 onwards. *Woody's Road*, for example, as one of the most extensive collections of Woody Guthrie's papers under the editorial comments of Guthrie's wife Marjorie Guthrie, pretends as if Guthrie and the Almanacs never sang those anti-war songs. While describing the Almanac Singers for the first time, the book claims that they became popular with their labor union songs, and they started singing war songs in favor of the Allies as of early 1942. Moreover, it is written that the “warfare changed his [Guthrie's] actions but not his direction,”³⁴⁴ while this thesis concludes the exact opposite of this argument. Guthrie's direction changed indeed significantly, but his actions, namely singing songs for the causes he believed in, remained the same.

Similarly, not many primary sources related to Pete Seeger touches upon the issue of his changing stance once the Soviet Union was invaded. While some of them do spare some space for it, the most popular documentary on Pete Seeger, *The Power of Song*, or his autobiographical works such as *The Incomplete Folksinger* and *Pete Seeger in His Own Words*, for instance, do not mention such a significant turning

³⁴³ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 71.

³⁴⁴ Edgmon and Logsdon, *Woody's Road*, 73.

point in his life at all. However, in order to draw a conclusion from a book, one does not always need to read what is written. On the contrary, what is not written can tell a lot, too. In this case, the fact that several works directly dealing with the lives of these two men do not prefer to mention this political change at all shows us that the creators of these works (in some cases the creators of such works were Guthrie and Seeger themselves) might not have found this change so pride-worthy or at least easily justifiable.

We put out some good songs and lived through exciting times. We participated in these exciting times. The Communist Party helped us do this. We called ourselves communists. Probably none of us agree even now on the definition of communism. But I don't think any of us are ashamed of what we did way back in the days of 1941 and 1942.³⁴⁵

In his latest autobiographical work, this is how Pete Seeger recalled those times.

“What we did way back in the days of 1941 and 1942” could possibly refer to their political turn or simply being so much affiliated with the Communist Party. Either way, he did not deny it, but he definitely needed to make sure his readers knew that they were not ashamed of it despite the fact that even he did not clearly state himself what they were not ashamed of. Nevertheless, this and other challenges mentioned above led me to find and benefit from as many primary and secondary sources as possible and read the same events taking place in the same periods of time from different points of view. This way, I managed to compile the accurate information needed for correct analyses throughout the study.

If we put aside the short period between August 1939 and June 1941 when American communists and the government were cross with each other, the second half of the Thirties and the World War II years following that turned out to be the golden age of

³⁴⁵ Seeger, *Pete Seeger in His Own Words*, 27.

American communism. The Party reached its greatest sphere of influence -almost- free from government persecution and gathered millions of supporters or at least sympathizers because it was a period when people were not forced to make a choice between the ideals of Americanism and the ideology of communism.³⁴⁶ Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger could easily fit themselves in this world where a worldview that combined communism and patriotism was possible to sustain. They defined themselves communists, and their political stance remained in almost complete compatibility with that of the Communist Party throughout the entire period that this study focuses on, but none of their actions or statements ever conflicted with the ideals of Americanism, or no American patriot could ever object to what they said or wrote at the time. From this point of view, Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie were exactly the model figures of the Popular Front era. They were a balanced, if not the perfect, blend of Americanism and communism. Even long after the demise of the Popular Front, they did not lose this balance, and despite their political “flip-flops,” they always remained as the fellow travelers of communism and Americanism: being firm believers of both but not unquestioning and devoted followers of any.

³⁴⁶ Spector, “Wasn’t That a Time,” 38; Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace*, 36.

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