



AN INTELLECTUAL AT LARGE

The Maverick Scholar

Theodore Draper spent some of his most prolific years writing, taking walks and collecting music in Princeton.

by Temma Ehrenfeld

Theodore Draper belonged to a generation of “intellectuals at large”: men who, without advanced degrees or teaching positions, spoke to contemporary issues in books and articles in journals such as *The New York Review of Books*. He began his career writing for Communist publications and made his reputation writing the history of the American Communist Party. Princeton is hardly a community one associates with the far Left. Yet it became Draper’s haven for 38 years, a place where he was free to be a scholar who followed his conscience. He died in Princeton at the age of 93.

The Young Revolutionary

The story of Theodore Draper and Princeton began in 1934, when the computer language genius Alan Turing, then a graduate student

in the Princeton University math department, asked a student Communist front group in New York to help him establish a branch. Twenty-one-year-old Ted Draper arrived from Brooklyn. Without bothering to get a permit, the young revolutionaries set up on a soapbox on the street near the Princeton University campus and Draper stood on it to speak. He had attracted a small crowd when the police promptly picked him up. Turing went looking for Albert Einstein for help. Instead, he produced James Alexander, the founder of the field of topology. Alexander arrived at the station at eleven in the evening and liked Draper enough to accept him into his custody. The next day, Draper and Turing formed a Princeton University branch of the student front group. In his later years Draper enjoyed the irony that

he’d been arrested only once—in the town he’d made his home, Princeton.

Returning As a Scholar

Draper would quickly abandon his Communist sympathies and turn to the subject as a historian, while building a reputation as a political journalist. The diplomat and historian George Kennan, a fixture at the Institute for Advanced Study, was an early admirer. Kennan twice asked the Institute to embrace Draper, succeeding in 1968, when he wangled him a five-year post in its School of Historical Studies. Draper stayed on in town after the post ended, writing on the most controversial subjects of his day, taking daily morning walks and haunting the Princeton Record Exchange, off Nassau Street.

The Making of a Maverick Intellectual

He was born to a Jewish family from Ukraine, with the name Theodore Dubinsky. His father died when he was 12, and he worked hard in his widowed mother's candy store. Neither parent was ever a Communist. He came under the party's influence in 1929 at New York's City College, where he joined the student front group that sent him to Princeton. Despite his talent as an organizer, Draper always had intellectual ambitions. He hoped to teach philosophy; and when a teacher told him that a Jew would never get a position teaching philosophy, his mother immediately changed the family name. But after only a year of graduate work at Columbia, in history, he was bored and dropped out to write for the Communist

all, Theodore Draper learned the lesson of his youth—to do his own thinking, scorn ideology, and distrust power.

The Institute Distances Itself

During the red-baiting years, Kennan became a key supporter of Draper, and when the Viking Press sent Kennan galleys of *The Roots of American Communism*, the first of Draper's two books on the party's history, he reviewed it favorably. When the book was attacked in the *New York Times*, with the implication that Draper was insufficiently anti-Communist, and the paper refused to publish Draper's letter in his defense, Kennan wrote his own supportive letter, which the *Times* did publish. (Publisher Arthur Ochs Sulzberger's letter to Kennan describes the whole incident as a "comedy of errors.") The next year, 1958, he made

of "containment" and could hardly be accused of being soft on Communism. But Kennan's request was turned down, with the explanation that the Institute needed to avoid "emotionally distorted and controversial" subjects like American Communism.

Stranger in a Strange Land

Over the next decade, Draper published his second volume, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, while winning attention as the foremost liberal critic of Castro's Cuba and an opponent of the Johnson invasion of the Dominican Republic. In 1968, much to his surprise, the California-based Hoover Institution made him the offer of a lifetime: an office and salary to write about Communism for as long as he liked. Aware that the Institution had a great

to the States.

Kennan entered the story again at this point when, on a visit to Switzerland, Draper met a former staff member at the State Department under Kennan, Louis Halle, and confessed he didn't know what to do next. Halle called Kennan at the Institute, and arranged for Draper to see him. The appointment, when it came, was touch and go: Draper was told that the Institute would not give him an office, or a residence, or even a salary. His funding would come from external sources yet to be arranged. Still, he'd been promised a refuge for five years to address his big project, a third volume on *American Communism*, this time covering the 1930s.

Facing the Past

As grateful as he was grateful to be in

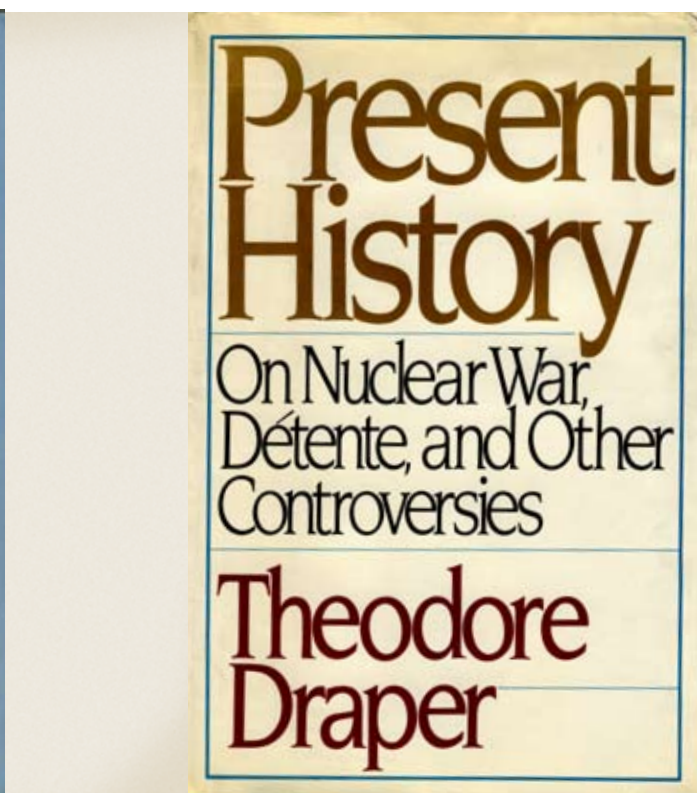
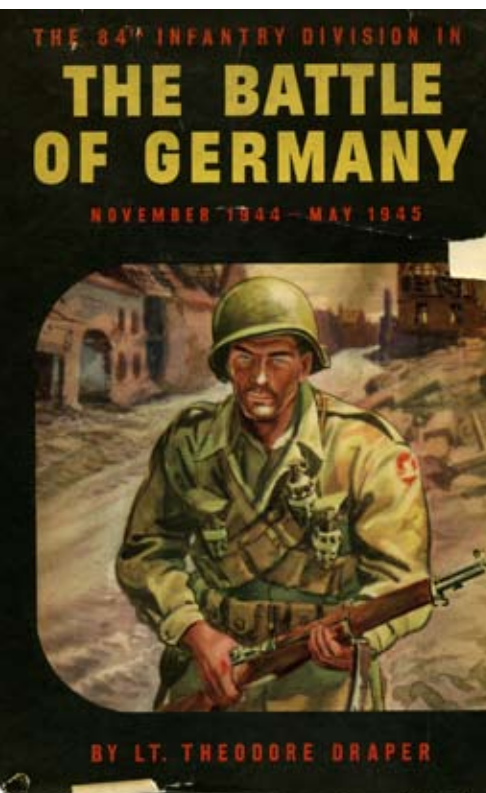
to support him, and when he applied for membership to the Council on Foreign Relations in 1971, Kennan recommended him as "a thoroughly decent person. His remote Communist past is to him an aid to understanding, not a hindrance."

Making Princeton Home

When it was time to leave the Institute, in 1973, the former *New Yorker* decided to stay in Princeton with his third wife, Priscilla Barnum, who had become his first editor. After some house shopping, they bought a home near Herrontown Woods where Draper maintained a strict writing schedule until he had a stroke at the age of 90. His days were full. He rose each morning at 7:30, took a half-hour "morning constitutional," worked in his study until his regular nap from 1:30 to 2:30, returned

point of view, delving into public records and writing in a pithy, factual style. He usually stayed with a subject for five years. In the *New York Review of Books*, where he published many articles, he at times engaged in acidly-worded battles in the letters section, most famously with then-Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger. The co-editor of the *Review*, Robert Silvers described Draper to the *New York Times* as "a man of extremely demanding moral judgment. He was contemptuous of men who made moral compromises in dealing with life-and-death matters, like the Vietnam War."

Draper rarely gave lectures. "I doubt he ever went on the Internet," Roger Draper remarked. He did use a computer, however, which enabled him to create an index for 50,000 pages of published but



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newspaper, *The Daily Worker*. He soon moved on to other Communist publications. Draper never actually joined the Party, however, and over time grew dissatisfied with editors toeing the Party line. He twice left jobs when he felt his integrity was at stake—either because his reporting was disregarded or an editor's opinions overrode his own. He eventually rejected the movement, not because of revelations about Stalin, but from a desire for intellectual freedom. "I either had to make up my mind to agree with the party line at all times or get out," he later wrote in a letter to *The New York Times*. Above

his first attempt to bring Draper to the Institute. At the time, the Institute had reason to distance itself from politics, as its then-director, J. Robert Oppenheimer, who had headed the project to build the first atom bomb, was under suspicion for opposing the development of the H-bomb. Oppenheimer had filled the Institute's School of Historical Studies with scholars in fields that were unlikely to attract controversy. An expert on Soviet history who had served in Moscow as a diplomat and eventually ambassador, Kennan was the father of the policy

deal of source material on Communism, Draper accepted, not realizing that it was a "bastion of old-time conservatism," as he put it. He might not have seemed out of place there, having kept apart from the liberal counterculture of the 1960s. He never owned a pair of jeans, according to his son, Roger, copy chief at the *McKinsey Quarterly* in New York, and although he opposed the Vietnam War, he had little sympathy for the student unrest, which must have reminded him of his own youth. Still, given the fiery politics of 1968, he found the Hoover Institution unbearable. He fled to London, with little interest in returning

Princeton, Draper couldn't write the book. There was no lack of material: Earl Browder, a rejected Party leader, was then living in Princeton and provided hours of interviews. The trouble was facing his past. "I found the story unbearably sad," he admits in unpublished papers, "and sometimes sat at the typewriter thinking mainly of my own spent youth." Abandoning the struggle with his third volume on *American Communism*, Draper instead wrote *The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism* (1970), in which he argued that blacks and white had no choice but to cooperate. Meanwhile Kennan continued

to his study until 5 p.m., and then had a traditional tea—cookies and Assam tea from McNulty's in New York, prepared in a proper teapot. After tea he read before dining at home. In the evenings he listened to classical music and occasionally played the recorder, the piano or the clavichord. A habitué of the Princeton Record Exchange, he accumulated some 300 CDs. In the summers, the couple escaped the New Jersey heat in the remotest part of Vermont. **A Private and Productive Life** In his long writing career, Draper addressed contemporary problems with a historian's

unindexed congressional hearings, in order to write *A Very Thin Line: The Iran Contra Affairs* (1991). Later, he would warn that another "usurpation of power by a small, strategically placed group within the government may well recur before we are prepared to recognize what is happening." As part of his determination to avoid distractions, Theodore Draper was adamantly private—so much so that when the *New York Times* asked to interview him for the purpose of a future obituary, he declined and instead wrote a statement that he sent in a sealed envelope, to be opened only after his death, which came in 2006.