

By 1934 Ware had assembled a secret Communist network in Washington, a cluster of seven cells or more, each with a leader who also belonged to an elite nucleus.²⁰ For Washington Communists, the byword was *secrecy*, and not the winking secrecy of the New York underground. There was already muttering that the New Deal was socialism in disguise. The legislation creating the AAA had been denounced on the floor of Congress as "more bolshevistic than any law or regulation existing in Soviet Russia" and been similarly reviled in the conservative press.²¹ So popular, FDR himself could laugh this off. But the bright young men of the Ware unit could not. At the first hint of suspicion their careers would be "wrecked," remembered Nathaniel Weyl, a young economist who within a year quit the unit—and left a choice AAA job—when the pressure of secrecy became unendurable.²²

Protocol was strict. Underground members were instructed to sever all ties to the visible left. "We must keep away from any place where leftists might gather," one member recalled. "We must avoid, as far as possible, associating with radicals, difficult as that might be in Washington. Even liberals . . . were out of bounds." Ware unit members were forbidden to buy *The New Masses* at a newsstand, although copies of the *Daily Worker* were circulated among them for educational purposes. The most exacting discipline was imposed on those in Ware's elite nucleus, who "were expected to have promising careers in the government" and so were "organized completely independently of the rest of the Washington Communists and set up on the basis of the strictest secrecy."²³ The members, simultaneously protecting their careers and their revolutionary work, came to see the two as being threatened interchangeably.²⁴

This led to a paranoid atmosphere. Nathaniel Weyl was not the only one unsettled by the pressure. Charles Kramer, the redheaded AAA economist who led Hope Davis's cell, solemnly cautioned members to expect "interrogation, possible torture. Such an idea, he admitted, might seem rather remote in the radical Washington climate, but climates could change fast."²⁵

Yet initially the cell's activity was innocent enough. Members discussed Communist texts as well as "our work in the various agencies where we were employed" and analyzed "the drift and policies of the Roosevelt administration." Now and then a unit member might "draft a report to be given to Hal, who presumably passed it on to the national leadership in New York."²⁶

as a consultant to the Department of Agriculture. The Ware Group was to form the base for Hiss's entry into secret intelligence work for the Soviet Union.⁵⁸

In retrospect, Hiss's metamorphosis from a follower of avant-garde culture to a committed political reformer was remarkably swift. But at another level it was not altogether unexpected. Hiss had entered the employment market at the very time that the first effects of the economic turmoil of the 1930s were beginning to take shape. Even before moving from Boston to New York, Priscilla had exhibited an attraction to collectivist politics. Once Alger came to the conclusion that the Depression was a result of moral and political failure on the part of "decrepit social structures," popular-front collectivism seemed an attractive alternative. The Soviet Union, which the United States government was officially to recognize in 1933, had yet to begin its Stalinist purges, and the darker side of Fascist collectivism was not yet visible. The International Juridical Association itself seemed an example of how liberals and collectivists of different stripes could join in work designed to help casualties of the Depression.

Alger's commitment to political reform may have seemed all the more attractive because it took him down a path that served to separate him and Priscilla more decisively from the network of his family. No one in the Hiss household had participated in politics. The engagement of Alger and Priscilla with reformist political programs served to give their household an identity quite distinct from that of the Baltimore Hisses. Further, Alger for the first time had become the center of his household's pursuits. He had left Baltimore and Boston on Priscilla's urging, accommodating her personal and professional needs. Now it was she who followed him to Washington, where he became simultaneously involved as a New Dealer and a member of Harold Ware's group.

By as early as 1934 Hiss had begun intelligence work for the Soviets. There are hints of what may have made him take that step. A combination of frustrations he encountered at the AAA and during his years as a designated custodian and "good boy" in the Hiss family made achieving a position of independence and mastery, that would boost his self-esteem, even more important. Although his marriage to Priscilla had been an act of defiance to Minnie and the accumulated weight of family responsibilities, it had at the same time been a taking on of a new set of burdens. Alger continued to search for something that would set him apart and allow him to exercise his unique talents. Participating in the New Deal, even if it had been the culmination of a new political awareness Priscilla's interests may have engendered,