

Communists in Tennessee? Red Scare, Highlander Folk School, & Civil Rights

Lesson plans for primary sources at the Tennessee State Library & Archives

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Grade Level: 9th & 11th Grade World History/Geography or other World History class

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Visit <http://sos.tn.gov/tsla/education> for additional lesson plans.



Introduction: During the 1950s, the conversation about Civil Rights in the United States and the prevalent fear of communism is often intertwined. Many Civil Rights activists are accused of supporting Communism. Highlander Folk School was a training center located near Monteagle, TN that supported the organized labor and Civil Rights movements and was investigated for supporting Communist activities. In 1959, the Tennessee General Assembly appoints a special investigating committee to look into alleged subversive activities at the school.

Guiding Questions:

- How did Tennesseans feel about the Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement?
- How do people act when they are afraid?

Learning Objectives: In the course of the lesson, students will understand that many Tennesseans were uncomfortable with the aims of the Civil Rights Movement and attempted to connect the movement with Communism.

Curriculum Standards:

US.76 Analyze the causes and effects of the Red Scare that followed WWII, including American's attitude toward the rise of communism in China, McCarthyism, blacklisting, Alger Hiss, J. Edgar Hoover, Estes Kefauver, and the Rosenbergs.

US.92 Describe significant events in the struggle to secure rights for African Americans, including the following: Influence of the Highlander Folk School and civil rights advocacy groups...

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

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Materials Needed:

- 1) For Introductory Activity: Overhead projector, internet access for students, or printed cartoon
- 2) Printed copies of TSLA sources or internet access:
 - a) [“Time To Do Some Poking Around”](#) political cartoon
 - b) [Edition of Common Sense](#)
 - c) [Georgia Commission on Education, photograph 1](#)
 - d) [Georgia Commission on Education, photograph 2](#)
 - e) [Letter to Governor Clement expressing concerns over Communism](#)
 - f) [Letter to Governor Clement expressing concerns over desegregation](#)
 - g) [Letter to Governor Clement from Ms. Glen Rose Jackson](#)
 - i) [Official Policy of Highlander Folk School](#)
 - j) [Subpoena of Myles Horton to appear before the 81st Tennessee General Assembly Special Investigating Committee of Highlander Folk School, 1959](#)
 - k) [Proposed questions to Myles Horton](#) from Special Investigating Committee
 - l) [Myles Horton Statement to Subcommittee of Internal Security of the Senate Judiciary Committee](#)
 - m) [Testimony of Robert Degen before the 81st Tennessee General Assembly Special Investigating Committee of Highlander Folk School, 1959](#)
 - n) [Highlander Folk School Manuscript finding aid from TSLA](#)

Background:

[“Highlander Folk School”](#)

Author: John M. Glen

Source Location: [Tennessee Encyclopedia of History & Culture](#)

[“Dig Deeper: Why did Americans fear communism?”](#)

Source Location: [Tennessee State Museum](#)

Lesson Activities:

Notes for Teachers:

This lesson plan should be part of an overall unit on the Cold War and/or Civil Rights. Students will need a basic understanding of the Cold War and the mood of the country towards Communism and events of the Civil Rights Movement up to about 1965.

Each of the activities and source sets can be used as a whole or broken into parts.

For all following primary sources activities, teachers can use the [TSLA document analysis worksheets](#) or the guiding questions below.

Lesson Activities Continued: Introductory Activity

Display the political cartoon, "[Time to do some poking around](#)" and ask students to answer orally or in writing:

How is the tree labeled?

What is coming from the tree?

Why would the Tennessee Legislature feel that it might be "Time to Do Some Poking Around?"

What does the cartoonist fear?

Debrief students, reminding them of the fears many Americans had of Communist infiltration AND the effects of desegregation. Share with the students that the Highlander Folk School was investigated by a committee of the Tennessee State Legislature. Share the lesson objectives with the class.

Instructional Activities

Inform students that they will be looking at a variety of primary sources dealing with the Highlander Folk School, fear of Communism, and fear of the Civil Rights Movement. WERE THE FEARS OF MANY TENNESSEANS JUSTIFIED?

Divide students into groups. Group sources are listed approximately in order of difficulty (Group One might be best for EL learners or students with reading delays, etc.).

Group One: Photographs (Georgia Commission on Education photos 1 and 2, "Common Sense")

For each photograph:

Who is in the picture?

Where was it taken?

What is the purpose of the photograph? Why do you think so?

What does the organization that released the photograph fear?

What evidence is presented to justify those fears?

Group Two, Three, and Four: Letters to Governor Clement

Why was the letter to the Governor written?

What is the fear of the letter writer?

How does the letter writer connect Civil Rights and Communism?

What evidence is offered to justify those fears?

Group Five: Proposed Questions and Subpoena

What are the purposes of the subpoena and questions?

What is the concern or fear of the Committee?

List specific questions to illustrate those fears.

Lesson Activities Continued:

Group Six: Testimony of Robert Degen

- To whom is the letter addressed? What is its purpose?
- Does Robert Degen share the concerns of many Tennesseans?
- What evidence does he provide to the Committee?
- Why would the Committee accept this evidence?

Group Seven: Myles Horton Testimony

- What does Myles Horton fear?
- According to his testimony, is Myles Horton a Communist? Do you believe him? Why or why not?
- What does Myles Horton believe would be a powerful weapon to fight Communism?
- Why does Myles Horton believe he is being investigated by the Committee?
- What evidence does Horton provide against his accusers?

Group Eight: [TSLA Finding Aid for Highlander Folk School Collection : Scope and Content](#)

- What is this document's purpose?
- Is the source trustworthy?
- What two activities were the main purposes of the Highlander School?
- Explain how each of those activities might be viewed by Tennesseans during the Cold War.
- Were the fears of the Committee justified?
- What evidence is used in this finding aid to describe the Highlander Folk School and its collection?

Have each group present their questions and answers. I recommend displaying each source as it is discussed. Draw out threads running through all of the sources, particularly Mr. Horton's appearance in many of the sources, fears of the Tennessee State Legislature and many ordinary Tennesseans, and the Highlander Folk School's connection to both the labor movement and the Civil Rights Movement.

Create a t-chart on the board as groups report labelled "Evidence Against Highlander School" and "Evidence For Highlander School." As the groups report, teachers should fill in the chart. Debrief at the end—Were the fears of many Tennesseans justified?

Conclusions may be difficult to reach—in the sources presented there is little actual evidence. History does seem to bear out the idea that the Highlander Folk School was targeted not for its Communist sympathies but because of its involvement with the Civil Rights Movement.

Lesson Activities Continued:

Extensions:

Have student view the FBI investigation documents at <http://vault.fbi.gov/Highlander%20Folk%20School>.

The Civil Rights anthem “We Shall Overcome” was arranged by Pete Seeger among others at the Highlander School. Have students listen to and read the lyrics and compare them to the objectives of the school.

Lyrics: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/exhibit/aopart9b.html#0919-0922>

YouTube video with lyrics: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNYeqe3LewE>

Compare the Highlander Folk School investigation with the investigations conducted by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee.

Assessment:

Write an essay or paragraph presenting evidence that fears of Tennesseans were or were not justified.

Write an essay or paragraph comparing fears of 21st Century Americans with the fears of Cold War Americans (War on Terror, racial divides, etc.).

Write an essay or paragraph comparing the Joint Committee’s investigation of the Highlander Folk School with the investigations conducted by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee.



PICTURED HERE (foreground) is Abner W. Berry of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. On the first row are Reverend Martin Luther King (2nd from right) of the Montgomery Boycott, Aubrey Williams (3rd from right) president of the Southern Conference Education Fund Inc. and Myles Horton (4th from Right) the director of Highlander Folk School. These "four horsemen" of racial agitation have brought tension, disturbance, strife and violence in their advancement of the Communist doctrine of "racial nationalism".

