Anti-Communism and the African-American Freedom Struggle

By Emily Burton

**Introduction:** The Cold War is typically taught as a separate entity from the Civil Rights Movement or African American Freedom Struggle, though these historical periods occurred concurrently. Teaching them together offers students a deeper understanding of the volatility of the late 1950s and 1960s. This unit exposes to students the tactics used during this time in the name of combating communism at home, allowing them to better understand the opposition faced during the civil rights struggle and thus better appreciate and contextualize the victories achieved. In this unit, students will explore communist ideals as they applied to the Civil Rights Movement and will question the appropriateness of the label ‘communist’ as used against Martin Luther King, Jr. and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Students also practice historical analysis skills throughout this unit.

To gain the most from this unit, students should be aware of the role of the NAACP in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* suit and the role of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and the Hollywood 10.

**Grades:** 11

**CA State Standards:** 11.9.3, 11.10.3, 11.10.4

**Essential Question:** Did powerful segregationists opposing the freedom struggle label leaders and organizations as ‘communist’ to diminish their influence or did national security require suspicion and investigation into potential communist infiltration?

**Unit Parts:**

1. Is King a Communist?
2. Communist Conspiracy?
3. Assessment: King’s Response to Vietnam

**Additional Resources for Teachers:**

1. [How to Think Like a Historian presentation](#)
2. [Thinking Like a Historian Worksheet](#)
3. [Student Sample from Emily Burton’s class](#)
Part One: Is King a Communist?

Introduction: This lesson will serve as a “hook” and will connect to students’ prior learning. Students will see the fluidity of communist ideals and how easily they would apply to the struggle for African American freedom. They will see a concrete example of Martin Luther King, Jr. being labeled as a communist and will apply historical thinking skills of contextualization and sourcing to determine the validity of the charge. This unit may take two class periods to complete.

Materials Needed:

- Handout A: Martin Luther King, Jr. At Communist Training School
- Handout B: Historical Thinking Bubbles
- Handout C: Anticommmunist Domestic Examples Table
- Handout D: Letter to Al Misegadis
- Handout E: Letter from Al Misegadis
- Domestic Examples Table Teacher Key (Note that this contains a Teacher Key for two documents used in Part II of this unit as well.)

Activities / Instructions:

1. Opening Activity: Write a response to the following: “In a private letter to Coretta Scott while they were dating in college, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote that he was: “…more socialist in my economic theory than capitalistic. And yet I am not so opposed to capitalism that I have failed to see its relative merits.” (King, 18 July 1952)

   Address the following questions in your response.
   - What does he mean by his statement?
   - What do you know about King and his life’s work that demonstrates that he was more socialistic?
   - Do you think King would have made this claim publicly during the Cold War? Why or why not?
   - What do you think the ‘relative merits’ of capitalism are?

2. After students share their responses with a partner, hold a class discussion, particularly focusing on the merits of both socialism and capitalism and how equality may have appealed to King and the politics of the time (i.e. McCarthyism and Red Scare) that would keep him from openly associating himself with communist ideals. This discussion should be all review.

3. Introduce to students that today will be about investigating claims. Students will need to be asking questions of what they read, much like they do on a daily basis. Introduce a current tabloid such as Star magazine and have students talk about
questions they might ask to figure out if the claims on the cover are true, such as “what else might have caused this to happen?” and “who else would agree with this?” Inform students that these are questions historians ask when they come across evidence.

4. Pass out the document for the investigation Handout A, “Martin Luther King Jr. At Communist Training School,” Handout B, the “thought bubbles,” and Handout C: Anticommunist Domestic Examples Table. Ask students to fill in basic information about authors and bias clues in Handout C: Anticommunist Domestic Examples Table from a brief skimming of the document in Handout A. Explain to students that they will be applying the thought bubbles to the document as they read through it a second time. Students fill in the rest of the table on Handout C once they have finished.

5. Debrief the arguments and bias clues with students and have students give their preliminary answer to whether or not they believe the arguments and why. Debrief with the class whether they would believe the flyer or not and list the reasons why. Then discuss whether Martin Luther King, Jr. is communist or not, and the reasons why. (Before delving into this discussion, consider assigning a freewrite or a homework essay addressing whether Martin Luther King, Jr. is communist or not. See student sample of homework essay).

6. Pass out to students Handout D: the Letter to Al Misegadis, which lays out Martin Luther King, Jr.’s argument against the flyer. Have students complete the last column of Handout C and discuss which, between King’s letter and the flyer, they might have believed if they were Al Misegadis.

7. Assign homework: ask students to write the letter to King that Al Misegadis originally wrote including why he would be concerned about the flyer. Share Al Misegadis’ original letter to King (Handout E) with students at the beginning of the next class.
Part Two: Communist Conspiracy?

**Introduction:** As a continuation on the theme of anticommunist influence on the freedom struggle for African Americans, this portion of the lesson will particularly focus on student identification of bias and weighing in on what students would believe if they were alive at the time of two featured documents: a brochure on the “un-American” nature of the House Un-American Activities Committee and a speech on the “ugly truth” on the NAACP.

**Materials Needed:**
- Handout F: Excerpt from The Ugly Truth About the NAACP
- Handout G: Communist Conspiracy Technique
- Handout H: Levels of Historical Analysis (Ugly Truth)
- Handout I: Levels of Historical Analysis (Communist Conspiracy Technique)
- Levels of Historical Analysis Teacher Key
- Handout J: The House Un-American Activities is the Most Un-American Thing in America

**Activities / Instructions:**

1. **Opening Activity: Move Your Feet:** Label three parts of the room- one “reliable,” one “indeterminable,” and one “unreliable.” Tell students you are going to share with them phrases from a speech that evaluates an organization. They have to decide if each phrase – taken alone – proves that the author or the speech is reliable or unreliable or if it’s indeterminable and go stand in one of the three corners accordingly. After each phrase, have students report out why they are where they are.

   **Phrases:** “[I am] prepared to prove everything”; “it shall be my purpose to… totally disrobe [this organization]”; “established by facts from official records”; “These facts have been uncovered, checked, assembled, and correlated”; “many weeks of intensive investigation”; “my purpose [is] to present this sinister organization in all its nakedness”; “the ugly truth… is so shocking so as to stagger the imagination”

   Debrief with students the phrases that a reliable piece of evidence would have, what gives clues of a bias, and how that affects the way in which evidence should be approached. Ask students what could affect the reliability of the speech they are about to hear, beyond choice of wording. These should come down to speaker, topic, and audience.

2. Pass out Handouts A, B, C, and D to students. Select (or preselect in the days prior to activity) a student to do a dramatic reading of Handout A, “The Ugly Truth About the NAACP,” and preliminarily discuss with students what they
would do if they heard this speech on the radio in 1955. Believe his every word? Question some of it? Then, have students work on Handout C, “Levels of Historical Analysis” for the speech with a partner. Finally, have students read Handout B, “Communist Conspiracy Technique” and work on its corresponding worksheet, Handout D.

Debrief with students the facts alleged in both documents: was this just a strategy of Southern politicians or were there legitimate concerns for communist infiltration in the country?

3. Inform students that they have been utilizing the skills of a historian in using the thought bubbles, in evaluating the legitimacy of word choice, and the believability of certain authors. For homework, ask them to take home Handout E, “The House Un-American Activities Committee is the Most Un-American Thing in America,” and write a paragraph explaining what they would do with this pamphlet if it were handed to them, paying particular attention to the elements of reliability and bias they identify.
Part Three: Assessment: King’s Response to Vietnam

Introduction: Students have by now seen a plethora of documents where Cold War anticommunism was applied to efforts in the African-American freedom struggle. In this portion of the unit, they will demonstrate how they understand this tension by responding to King’s “Beyond Vietnam” speech from the perspective of an anticommunist zealot and by addressing the essential question in a simile: “Fighting for freedoms in America during the Cold War was like…”

Materials Needed:

- Access to Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute website to play Dr. King’s “Beyond Vietnam” speech and access a transcript of the speech for students
- Poster paper and markers

Activities / Instructions:

1. Play King’s “Beyond Vietnam” speech for students. Discuss as a class why he took the position he did. Inform them of how this negatively affected his relationship with key national leaders, particularly with Lyndon Johnson.

2. Tell students they will take on the perspective of someone who is extremely paranoid of communism at home – a point of view they have encountered throughout the unit parts of this lesson. Ask them to create a piece of propaganda (flyer, pamphlet, etc.) or write a letter to a local newspaper exhibiting the ways in which someone with this perspective would have interpreted King’s words.

3. Finish the lesson by having students create a poster that illustrates the impact anticommunist sentiment had on the struggle for freedom. Ask students to center the poster on a simile they will finish that begins: “Fighting for freedoms in America during the Cold War was like…” Ask students to also write a paragraph that explains the reasoning for their simile. Have students present their posters and reasoning to the class.