For her wartime mission, Vorse set out in 1942 to report the impact on American workers of the total mobilization of the home front. For almost one year, she traveled through the nation’s war-production centers, reporting her findings in newspapers and on the radio. Her articles have been described by the author of a recent labor history of World War II as among the most insightful pieces of social history written during the war years.1 She analyzed the source of labor’s unrest, portrayed the blight of racism in the land, and described the problems faced by millions of women workers. Her critical social commentary reads well today, but was deeply at odds with American propaganda of the forties. Still, if nearing seventy was teaching her anything, it was that with age came a self-assurance that lessened the cost of nonconformity.

Vorse first offered her study of wartime labor to Alfred Knopf in September 1943. Within a week she had a polite no. In November the book was returned by Harper & Bros., Harcourt and Brace, Appleton, and Doubleday. The rapid series of rejections meant the manuscript was not even scaling the first barriers to serious consideration. In December, the book was refused by Random House, Holt, and Norton. For the first time in thirty-five years, and after the publication of sixteen books, she could not interest a publisher in a completed manuscript. Her confidence shattered, Vorse took to her bed for three weeks. She consoled herself with the knowledge that wartime publishing did not favor the realistic picture she had created. “From here on, I wonder who will read my pieces. I see them beating against the vast indifference of the country.” Fortunately,
she could not know then that her eighteenth manuscript, a dull study of the Consumers’ League, would also fail, and that her nineteenth one, a feminist satire, would be unthinkable heresy to publishers during the 1950s.²

At age sixty-nine, she stumbled, mourned her loss, and recovered, yet something loose and romantic now crept into her writing, especially her fiction. Forceful women or discontented heroines were distinctly out of fashion in the women’s magazines, and she could not master a new formula. Her labor work also suffered from her failure to move as fast as history did. It was as though she were so weighted with the horror of pre-New Deal labor wars that every sign of worker advance after the war appeared more glorious than it actually was. Too much of her future labor journalism would be enveloped in sweetness, her critical analysis obscured by breathless awe at the wonder of picket lines unmolested by state policemen or company-bought private armies. Vorse would continue to write as if union activism were still the piercing edge of social change, even after union leaders had entered a mutually profitable truce with Cold War corporate America. She might have moved on, to reflect on the meaning of business unionism as part of an ongoing historical process. She did not, and in her work it was the difference between surviving intact as a radical intellectual and becoming a respected anachronism.

The war years did bring one welcome change. When prosperity ended the Depression in a matter of months, Ellen and Jack moved to Montana, Heaton and his wife into an apartment of their own. Her youngest, Joel, who had worked as a radio script writer, became a correspondent with the Coast Guard. She vowed never to become stranded in family financial responsibilities again, a promise that events, and lack of extra money, allowed her to keep.

Living in Washington, Vorse enjoyed for the first time in her life a circle of friends composed entirely of women, most of them much younger than she. Members of the group—including Hilda Worthington Smith, Kathryn Lewis (the daughter of the famous labor leader), Jo Herbst, Fleeta Springer, and Ann Craton Blankenhorn—ate and drank together, saw plays and exhibits, attended meetings, and shared ideas and their work lives in shifting combinations that brought two or three of them together almost every night.

The anti–New Deal right in the capital had discovered the electoral value of reducing all modern history to a death dance between communism and the Republic. On May 21, 1942, the red chasers hit close to home; a furious Jo Herbst burst into Vorse’s apartment to announce that

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she had lost her job with a government agency where she had prepared radio transcripts for transmission abroad. No reason for her sudden dismissal was given Herbst, but it was clear that it was related to a "loyalty" investigation of government employees by the FBI, in turn a product of the anti-Communist campaign that began to roll in the first months of FDR's war administration. Unable to determine the specific charges against her, Herbst could not prove to be false what she did not know to be alleged. Herbst and Fleeta Springer were the first of many close friends of Vorse's to suffer denial of civil rights in the war years and after because of past or present leftist beliefs. The progressivism of thousands of Americans in the 1930s was fast on its way to becoming the sin of the 1950s.

Vorse's new group of friends in the capital indicated her growing alienation from the older literary circle centered about Provincetown. Dos Passos, in particular, had turned so far to the right after 1940 that Vorse maintained her connection to him more out of loyalty to their shared past and because of her love for Katy, than out of tolerance of his political transition. Vorse felt that even Edmund Wilson momentarily succumbed to a version of anticommunism that she saw as an attempt to make a simple morality play out of the tangled disorder of history, as well as a threat to future world peace and civil liberty in the United States. "Socially . . . it's a desert [in Provincetown]," she wrote Herbst. "Charles Walker and Bunny [Edmund] Wilson and his wife [Mary McCarthy] were over together with some friends and the talk about Russia was unbelievable. Bunny pontificates more and more. . . . I am feeling very low. . . . And intellectuals here are so worked up concerning Russia . . . that no real conversation is possible, even among themselves. All such talk ends in a brawl. . . . In these momentous days one needs good talk. . . . Do write me, Jo."4

In the spring of 1944, Vorse won an assignment from Fawcett Publishers to report the political situation in Mexico, where she lived for the next year, returning to Provincetown only for the summer season. Her small income, fattened by the sale of several pieces to the New Yorker, would stretch further in Mexico. The exotic crew of writers and artists in Mexico City, centered about the painter Diego Rivera and the writer Anita Brenner, seemed more intent on their art and loves than on politics. Vorse found the delightfully free and slightly mad political environment a relief from the reactionary backlash at home. With all her children now self-supporting, it was her first lengthy vacation from writing since Bert Vorse's death thirty-four years before. But even though she was now seventy-one, she never once thought of the Mexican interlude as retirement.

Several months before the war ended, Vorse began her campaign for
an overseas job to report events in postwar Europe. She applied to the
largest nonmilitary intergovernmental operation in history, the United
Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, founded by forty-four
nations in November 1943 to provide economic and medical assistance
to the invaded countries devastated by war. Her experience seemed made
to order for the dazzling opportunity UNRRA offered her to travel and
write. For the magnificent salary of twenty dollars a day, she was hired
to produce pamphlets describing UNRRA efforts in Greece, Yugoslavia,
Czechoslovakia, and Italy.

It was without a premonition of disaster that she returned to the Public-
licity and Information Division for a more detailed discussion of her re-
sponsibilities as an UNRRA staff member. The director explained to her
with deep embarrassment that after a long conference with others, he had
decided she was too old for the job; he feared she might become ill or die
abroad. “Now age leapt out at me,” she wrote. “I who had been secretly
proud of never doing anything about my looks, wished that I had the
moral support which a youthful appearance can give a woman, a woman
who has for instance dyed her hair an encouraging red, who has had her
face and neck lifted, and bright shining caps put on all her teeth.” Finally,
UNRRA found the proper formula to resolve its dilemma; she would travel
under military orders as an official war correspondent. (Although she had
trimmed seven years off her age on the UNRRA application, she may
have been, at seventy-one, the oldest war correspondent traveling under
U.S. sponsorship.)

Only her passport picture would remain to remind her of her trial in
obtaining the UNRRA job, she wrote, “for no bride has ever done her hair
more carefully for her wedding than I did mine for this picture. I have had
other passport pictures which made me look a halfwit or a criminal, and
others that gave the impression of a hatchet-faced woman of hale middle
age. But the picture that peers at me from my [1945] passport is the face
of a thousand schemes and compromises—an old, old, crafty face.”

Vorse probably never knew that she was then the object of an intense FBI
investigation. It is impossible to know the exact information or incident
that excited FBI interest. The crucial documents from her case file were so
heavily censored prior to their release under the Freedom of Information
Act as to obscure completely the purpose of the federal inquiry. In March
1944, just as Vorse entered Mexico, the FBI’s Boston Field Office initiated
an investigation under the category “Security Matter—Communist.”
a code to describe persons “considered potentially dangerous to internal security.” The new evidence against her included interviews with confidential informants. One reported that she was “a misguided liberal,” not a Communist. Another more favored by the FBI was armed with a list of Vorse’s activities and affiliations during the period from 1920 to 1942, including the testimony given against her before House and Senate committees, and a report that a German-language magazine published in Moscow had referred to her as “a reliable revolutionary.” This informant insisted that Vorse was “a Communist agitator... directing the organizations of Women’s Auxiliaries of the CIO.”

In November 1944, J. Edgar Hoover directed that Vorse be assigned a Security Index number as a “native born Communist,” thus ensuring that she would be taken into custodial detention in the event of a national emergency. The Security Index and plan for detention without right of habeas corpus were unknown to the public, Congress, or the judiciary. Vorse’s placement on the Security Index, with all its frightful consequences, was reached in typical FBI fashion—through brief, sloppy investigative tactics, based on hearsay and guilt by association, and supported by secret witnesses unknown to the accused.

Hoover’s skillful public relations created the popular myth of an incorruptible and above all, effective, FBI. In fact, numerous FBI investigations of “subversives” are known to have been exceedingly clumsy and inaccurate. In Vorse’s case, as in so many others, the ineptness of the FBI inquiry becomes almost comical, as the agents valiantly struggled to locate this dangerous woman, Mary Vorse, “alias Mary H. O’Brien,” the newly designated threat to the internal security of the American people.

First—after an unsuccessful weeks-long surveillance of her old apartment in Washington—FBI agents thought to ask the Provincetown postmaster for her forwarding address. Thus did they easily locate her in Texas where she was visiting her sister-in-law during the Christmas season. When Vorse reentered Mexico in February, the FBI learned her hotel address in Mexico City, but soon lost her trail once again. Although the Boston office suggested to FBI headquarters that further investigation was not warranted, Hoover insisted that her Security Index be maintained. In June 1945, while Vorse was in New York negotiating for the UNRRA job, Hoover asked the American embassy in Mexico City to locate her and ascertain the nature of her Communist activities. His letter described her as fifty-five—a mere sixteen years off. Five more letters were exchanged between the embassy and Hoover. Vorse had meanwhile sailed for Europe en route to her UNRRA assignment.
Undaunted, the FBI maintained hot pursuit of her cold trail. In December 1945, the Boston Field Office learned that Vorse had an APO address; Boston suggested that the New York Field Office might wish to check with the War Department to see if Vorse was in the armed forces. The search was delayed several weeks because her case was inadvertently directed to the New Haven, Connecticut, office. Three months later, the FBI in New York advised Hoover that Vorse might be located through the embassy in Rome. In April, the embassy informed him that she was not to be found in Italy, even though Vorse was at that time working at the UNRRA office in Rome. Toward the end of May, the FBI reported her living at a Washington, D.C. address, although she was actually visiting her son Joel in London.

Meanwhile, an agent in the Boston office reviewed the case and became suspicious. One can see his computations on the pages of Vorse’s file, as he attempted to figure her approximate age using the various inaccurate figures for her birth date—1881? 1883? He obviously became disturbed at the thought of chasing after this aged woman and directed the New York office to determine her age. New York reported their failure to locate her birth records.

Suddenly, after thirty-two months of failure to find her, the Boston Field Office stated its renewed determination to close the case, in belated recognition that “there was little or no legally admissible evidence to prove the subject to be a member of the Communist Party and to have knowledge of the aims and purposes thereof.” In fact, the office had acquired no additional evidence of any kind since the items obtained when she was originally assigned a Security Index number almost three years before. It seems likely that the Boston agents decided to drop the case when they determined that Vorse was in her late sixties (she was actually seventy-two). This time Hoover, too, was ready to throw in the towel. On January 15, 1947, FBI headquarters, still not sure of her location, also closed the case, placing her hefty dossier of over two-hundred pages in the general “investigative case file,” where it would remain until the next FBI intrusion into her life in 1949.8

As UNRRA publicist, Vorse traveled through Greece, Yugoslavia, and Italy during 1946, visiting isolated villages, destroyed cities, and displaced persons camps to translate into human terms the impact of UNRRA on the lives of ill, hungry, and desperate people. She also published a series of articles on political and economic conditions in Greece, Italy, and

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1942–1966
Germany in *PM*, as well as in major outlets like the New York *Times*, the Washington *Post*, the Boston *Herald*, and the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*.  

For the first time in twenty-five years, Vorse found herself free of immediate financial and family worries. The Provincetown house had been rented; she traveled and lived at government expense, while earning a generous salary from UNRRA. As a young woman, she had longed for just such an opportunity. Now she relished the chance as much as ever, but soon learned to her dismay that loss of physical energy gravely limited her ability to produce quality material.

She noted another big difference. She was alone much of the time during her thirteen months with UNRRA, isolated from other staff members who treated her with the sometimes polite—often cruel—indifference offered to the aged by the very young. It was not an easy adjustment for Vorse who was long accustomed to deference as a distinguished writer. She learned anew how growing old changed the world's perception of her. The knowledge that older women were treated differently from aging men rankled. “That is why sergeants’ eyes bug out to see [my] grey hair under a field cap . . . when grey-haired colonels are thick as cranberries in a bog. Even in Washington with the government being run by the well-along in years, and the high places started with active men in their seventies, an older woman causes remark.” Whereas no one thought to congratulate older generals, Congressmen, or corporation executives on not being in their dotage, well-meaning young secretaries in Rome felt free to remark on her astounding ability to get about. Vorse felt “perpetually reminded” that she was “approaching the grave . . . that tomorrow—or shortly thereafter—there will be no more work.”

Separated from UNRRA in January 1947, Vorse spent eight months traveling and writing of postwar conditions in Germany, France, and England for the New York *Times*, the New York *Post*, and the *Cape Codder*. Without distinction, this work presents superficial accounts of the operation of the American military government. Her political concerns are revealed only in letters to her friends. She told Jo Herbst and Ann Craton Blankenhorn of her disgust at the failure of denazification. Most worrisome to her was the general hatred of the Soviet Union she encountered in Western Europe. Vorse had realized at once that “since the atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima . . . all values had changed with fission. We are now in a new world.” Yet despite entry into a vastly new era of human history, the world was dividing into two hostile forces, each billing itself as an absolute good in battle with absolute evil. In such a conflict, accommodation with the enemy was unthinkable, and hence nuclear war inevitable. “I believe
that both Russia and ourselves have forced a stream of misunderstandings,” Vorse wrote Jo Herbst from Frankfurt in 1947. “What was a trickle fed by a thousand irresponsible statements, a thousand lies, has now become a current swelling on to the abyss of war . . . in which the nations are equally enmeshed and for whose starting we are equally guilty . . . if blind people who set off a deadly machine by chance can be called guilty. . . . How can one write of anything else but fighting for the basis of a lasting peace? What’s happening here dwarfs anything else.”

That summer Vorse visited Joel in London and met her infant granddaughter. Turning toward home after two years abroad, she seemed to know she was seeing Europe for the last time. “Anyway,” she wrote, “I’ve enjoyed every moment and if I were to die tomorrow I couldn’t but rejoice at having had such an absorbing last spectacle of the world.”

Just as over a quarter of a century earlier, Vorse returned from Europe to an American postwar Red Scare. As the United States and the Soviet Union moved to consolidate their wartime gains and establish or strengthen their respective spheres of influence, a propaganda campaign in preparation for war dominated the politics and economies of both nations. Yet many Americans who feared atomic destruction did not support a global defense or a fight to the death against communism. Others, like Vorse, believed that talk of containing communism did not reflect commitment of American policy makers to world democracy, so much as their willingness to strengthen even authoritarian anti-Communist regimes abroad in order to limit revolutionary change. When Henry Wallace voiced criticism of President Truman’s foreign policy, Wallace became a rallying point for those liberals and leftists who questioned the U.S. shift to a hard-line Cold War diplomacy.

A real choice was offered to the non-Communist American left when Wallace became the 1948 presidential candidate of the Progressive Party. Although Vorse favored his stand for what later would be called “peaceful coexistence,” she could not support a futile third-party effort, which would weaken the Democratic chance for victory. She also felt that Wallace and his supporters were “thinking still in terms of Russia under Lenin’s model of 1921. And to hear his followers talk is like going back to the liberalism of that era. It is terrifying, especially as these followers are . . . completely hornswoggled by commies. . . . The Russian dictatorship is not the revolution.”

As usual, Vorse did not fit any common political pattern. Devoid of a
political home for the remainder of her life, she remained an unrepentant independent radical, even as the American left dwindled into virtual eclipse during the fifties. “It would be a good thing to let it be known how you feel about Wallace,” a friend told her. “You know like me you have a record.” But Vorse refused to spend her old age “in the fruitless pastime of acting like a turtle engaged in not sticking out its neck. The dumb bunnies [in the intelligence agencies] have no doubt long since got me docketed, and I intend to talk with whomever I want to—and be seen and go with whom I choose.” She had made up her mind on a few subjects—one, that the most important goal in the nuclear age was to keep the peace; some area of agreement must be reached with the Soviet Union. A second opinion—made easier for her to embrace because she had no family to support and no waged position to protect—was that one must fight the redbaiters: “Everybody seems afraid today for fear someone will call them a commie. . . . You can lose your job because you were seen going with so and so—[but I believe] being a pro-fascist is worse than being a communist.”

Vorse soon demonstrated her resistance to anti-Communist crusaders. En route to Mexico in 1949, she visited in Los Angeles with her reporter friend Margaret Larkin who had married Albert Maltz in 1937. As one of the famed “Hollywood Ten,” Maltz had defied the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947, was blacklisted as a scriptwriter, and eventually went to prison for contempt of Congress. Vorse was “burned up over the evil form of censorship” that banned the production of Maltz’s work, but she also found it hard to talk with the Maltzes. As Communist sympathizers, Maltz and his wife “seem to be living in a world of illusions,” Vorse wrote Herbst from California. Still, that Vorse was willing to stay in Maltz’s house during the period his conviction was under appeal shows her courageous determination not to be intimidated during the Cold War red scare, despite her vulnerability to blacklist as a writer. The witchhunt led by the committee that President Truman once called the “most un-American thing in America” had achieved virulent influence by 1949. Her association with Maltz and Margaret Larkin definitely placed at risk Vorse’s own ability to find publishing outlets. She was fulfilling her promise to “see and go with whom I choose,” no matter how popular the inquisition against free speech and free thought might be.

During her last years as an active journalist, Vorse attended CIO and UAW conventions as often as she could manage. There she could count on recognition by the union leadership, public accolades, and always a
complimentary room and meals. A convention meant dinner or coffee with the old-timers of the labor movement, shared memories of having been part of a stirring human effort, political conversations so heated it seemed that the fate of the nation was at stake, introduction to the admiring young who knew her work. All this brought a sense of relatedness—a confirmation of her choices in the world. When the union greats on the stage spoke her name into the microphone, paid notice to her presence in the great crowd, she could feel again the thrill of vital involvement in a magnificent endeavor. “When I went to greet [Philip] Murray at the cocktail party,” she reported to her diary in 1951, “to my astonishment he said he saw me in the audience, then turning to delegates . . . he went on, ‘This is the darling of the labor movement. We all love her. You must join me on the platform, make free of the platform.’ . . . I was amazed at his fond warmth. It is in this way by the various people in the labor movement knowing me that I get my laurel crown placed on my head, as much by the obscure big steelworker [who is] Murray’s bodyguard, as by Murray himself.” 15

Trapped as a relic in the American political reaction of the fifties, she was on hand to see the purging of much of the left from the CIO in 1949 and 1950. She feared that without a strong radical faction within the CIO—the last remaining dissident group of any consequence within the nation—there could be no significant opposition to challenge the government’s abuse of civil liberties or the country’s growing militarism. Vorse found the scenes of the 1952 UAW convention so painful that she left the meeting early: “[The convention] degenerated into something monotonous and dreary, of a union which has no vital healthy opposition . . . . Not only that but . . . the State Dept. wobbles due to the attacks of McCarthy. . . . Government has passed into the hands of reactionaries . . . [and] everybody is engaged in building bombshelters.” 16

Another kind of vacancy depleted her life. Over a period of five years, she lost her oldest friends. The first to die was Hutchins Hapgood. A harder blow came when her sister-in-law Josie suffered a fatal heart attack in June 1947, while Vorse was in Europe. In September, just as Vorse returned from London, Katy Dos Passos was killed in a grotesque automobile accident on Cape Cod. Her head was nearly sliced off in the collision, and Dos Passos lost his right eye. Susan Glaspell was the next to go, ten months later. Vorse helped to nurse Neith Boyce, whose death followed in 1951. Finally, Vorse must have felt the news of Robert Minor’s death the next year. “These steep stairs I climb slowly,” she wrote in her diary. 17
As the years progressed, Vorse also worried about money. After the war, she sold only a few articles to the high-paying journals; her work for the labor press or for small journals like the New Republic and the Nation paid very little. Renting out rooms in her Provincetown house was not enough to sustain subsistence. In the long spells between sales, Vorse relied on monetary gifts from professional organizations or a grateful labor movement. She received her first such payment in 1952 from the Artists' and Writers' Relief Fund of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The next year the United Auto Workers sent her an unspecified sum. In 1954, the Sidney Hillman Foundation sent five hundred dollars in “deep appreciation of your pioneering efforts and your many achievements.” In the 1960s, Vorse grew more dependent on monetary gifts, which were often accompanied by tender best wishes and recognition of her earlier struggle and sacrifice on behalf of workers.18

In her mid-seventies, a wondrous change came about in Vorse’s life. Her long, aching concern over family relationships dwindled and finally disappeared. Although he had little money, Heaton seemed happy enough in his life as a writer and musician. Joel had a successful career as a television producer and director in New York. When Ellen divorced the artist Jack Beauchamp in 1948, she did not return to Cape Cod, but worked at a series of service jobs in the West. Her decision to join Alcoholics Anonymous marked a complete reversal in Ellen’s life style. As she conquered her alcohol addiction, she also found a new stability and contentment through religion. In 1951, Ellen married the attorney Frederick “Archie” Boyden and lived with him until her death in an automobile accident in the 1970s.

Vorse’s relations with her children had always been intense, more egalitarian than parental. In her last years, the old wounds healed. She lived long enough to enjoy her children’s middle-age maturity, and she was richly graced with their love and respect. In the twenty years before Vorse’s death, Ellen wrote her several times each week, long, newsy letters filled with warmth and concern. After all the countless, heartbreaking scenes of battle, reconciliation with Ellen seemed a miracle. Now, in classic fashion, it was time for the daughter to play the part of nurturing parent, and for the aging mother to assume the role of coddled child. Vorse could also count on the steady and loving attention of her sons. The children customarily returned with Vorse’s grandchildren to spend several weeks of their summer vacation in Provincetown each year. Now—at last—Vorse had
the time to prepare their favorite meals, settle down to animated political conversations, play with her grandchildren, quietly relish her children and their companionship.

For over forty years Vorse had been tortured with the belief that her greatest failure in life was as a mother. Now, near the end of her life, she saw that as untraditional as her children were, they were also clearheaded social thinkers who greatly admired her accomplishments. She was uncommonly proud of their commitment to progressive politics. Heaton, as highly political as herself, wrote for the local newspaper. (In the 1980s, Heaton would appear as one of the twelve “witnesses” in Warren Beatty’s movie Reds, the story of John Reed and the Greenwich Village crowd.) Vorse’s younger son, Joel, received the National Brotherhood Award in 1960 from the National Conference of Christians and Jews for a public service production that discussed restrictive housing practices in the United States. In 1961, Ellen joined a small group of inspired peace marchers who protested the production of nuclear weapons.

Clearly, Vorse’s maternal wisdom had not been so frail, after all. Quite unlike herself, her children had embraced their mother’s most important beliefs and most cherished values and made them their own. With that knowledge there came to Vorse a serene peace, more meaningful, more precious, because so long denied.

Disillusioned by labor politics and excluded from the arena, Vorse returned to investigative reporting, publishing her last major piece at seventy-eight. Based on six months of research on waterfront crime in New York, the article won national attention. Walter Winchell predicted it would be made into a play. A condensed version appeared in the high-circulation Reader’s Digest. The story was a grand finale to her forty years as a labor journalist.

“The Pirate’s Nest of New York,” published in Harper’s Magazine in 1952, shows Vorse at the height of her reportorial skill. Her tale of greed, murder, courage, and even humor, leaves the reader informed and infuriated. Here one finds documented evidence, complete with names of mobsters who dominated the union local, parcelled out the jobs, took the kickbacks, and ran the rackets. Vorse’s work, along with that of a few other star reporters like Murray Kempton and Malcolm Johnson, aroused public interest in waterfront crime and its causes and led to the establishment of a commission, which made some reforms. Harper’s gave the piece a long introduction, praising her as “not only the dean of American labor
reporters but also one of the most active and indefatigable. She has been writing for *Harper’s* for almost fifty years (since 1906 to be exact) and we don’t know any reporter of either sex or of any age who can dig out a tough and explosive story with more energy, imaginative grasp, and human kindness.” These were heady words but not so fulfilling as the attention she received at the CIO convention that year: “When people rush up to me and say they have been longing to meet me and that my book has been a turning point in their lives . . . it is like a Turkish bath of ego building. . . . This year they’re all saying that I got these crime hearings going through my piece in *Harper’s*.”

Vorse moved to New York while tracing the connection of waterfront crime to politicians, businessmen, and union leaders. Her son Heaton served as her researcher in areas near the docks where the presence of any woman, much less an elderly one, would have created an immediate sensation. Vorse spent weeks arranging clandestine meetings, talking to dissident members of the gangster-ridden International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA), and coaxing friends and widows of murdered men to talk to her about the mob terror that ruled the docks.

Her most adventurous interview was with Anthony (Tony “Bang Bang”) Anastasia, hiring boss of the Brooklyn piers, prominent official in the ILA, and brother of the notorious Albert, of Murder, Inc. For years afterward, Vorse loved to describe her meeting with Anthony Anastasia, no doubt embellishing the details as the story grew. She had dressed carefully one morning, put on a demure lace collar and a prim black hat with a long face veil, and gone to his Brooklyn office. She found him in an expansive mood. Perhaps he was amused by the incongruous appearance of this pleasant and seemingly eccentric old lady. Playing the role to the hilt, Vorse fed him adoring smiles. He answered her questions with good humor, despite the worried protestations of an employee who sat beside him. “It’s OK, she’s harmless,” Anastasia assured his companion. Finally, his underling’s warnings grew more insistent and Vorse was ushered courteously from the room. Certainly it never occurred to Anastasia that the nice old grandmother who had wandered into his office might be a famous labor reporter.

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Despite the triumph of her waterfront story, Vorse’s return to Yaddo in 1954 made her feel an outdated ancient. The atmosphere was so strikingly different from her last stay at the writers’ retreat twenty-two years before that she could think of nothing else. She wrote a great deal in her diary.
about what she saw as the younger generation's loss of political content in both their work and their lives. The writer Jeannette Andrews remembered that Vorse often entertained the other residents in the evenings with stories about past labor battles. The other guests may have been less enthralled than Vorse imagined and only listened courteously to an old woman's blissful recitation of lost and better days.22

Mary Vorse talks too much, tries to monopolize every conversation, and has lived too long, Ann Craton Blankenhorn wrote to Herbst a few years later. "Mary looks ancient, fragile, weak, walks very slowly . . . petulant, nervous and poor . . . still wanting to go somewhere—anywhere—for the sake of going."

I know she is afraid of being alone, and her need for seeing people . . . is to escape from herself and her fears—old age, illness, no money. But I have decided she has no inner life. . . . Her constant going in her young and youngest days was based on her inability to be alone, even briefly. There is no such thing now as living quietly with books and one's own reflections. . . . She must be here to telephone all and sundry in order to be invited for lunch or dinner—she counts on those free meals to pay her room rent. She is too tired and too feeble to go so much, and she looks terrible. . . . She wants talk and to talk. . . . The hell of it is that is what happens when one lives on and on.23

Other reminders of her advanced years were the frequent inquiries from eager scholars. Would she discuss with the researcher her memory of the Provincetown Players? Eugene O'Neill? the Wobblies? the staff of the Masses? Then there was the group of efficient archivists, anticipating her death, who wrote to ask about the possibility of acquiring her papers for their university libraries. This pleased her immensely. With an archive, she was assured a special kind of immortality as an important person with a unique perspective. Periodically during the ten years before her death, Vorse spent many months sorting through her boxes of letters, diaries, clippings, manuscripts, culling from the mass only what she could not bear to reveal but leaving most of it intact. Reading through the accumulated data of over sixty years of living encouraged a pensive self-analysis for which she had never made time before. She added corrective notes, cautionary reminders, and illuminating references to earlier materials, carefully dating the new remarks. The bits of paper stashed about her house in nooks and closets took on new significance—the basis for her place in history.

During her last years, Vorse's life assumed a different kind of literary
prominence. Her experience was put to symbolic use by two well known authors, John Dos Passos and Murray Kempton. Dos Passos presented her as the character Anne Comfort in his thinly disguised autobiographical novel, *Chosen Country*, published in 1951. Four years later, Murray Kempton wrote a lengthy piece about her in *Part of Our Time*, his study of the radicals of the thirties. Vorse was flattered by their attention to her life, although she feigned an attitude of indifference in one case, and annoyance in the other.

*Chosen Country* is the first in a series of three novels about American life Dos Passos planned as a sort of sequel to the trilogy *U.S.A.*. In the fifties Dos Passos viewed the world as an archconservative. Thus the hero of *Chosen Country*, a fictionalized version of Dos Passos himself, is made sad and wise beyond his years through his youthful brush with radicalism. He manages to escape leftist influence and embraces the American way. Dos Passos wrote the novel as a memorial to his beloved Katy and their life together. He used fictionalized sketches of people he knew to represent strands of American experience. The real-life models for his characters were easily identifiable by those readers who knew Dos Passos well. Beside Katy and John Dos Passos, there appeared their relatives, friends of their youth, and people Dos Passos had met in Paris, New York City, and Provincetown. Dos Passos again showed his fascination with the personality of Mary Vorse. His presentation of Anne Comfort, in a chapter entitled “Footnote on Social Consciousness,” is an unmistakable description of Vorse’s affair with Robert Minor, who appears in the novel as Carl Humphries.

As a young woman, Anne Comfort knew she wanted a career. She entered an unhappy marriage, lived in pre-World War I Greenwich Village and gave birth to a son and daughter. Like Mary Vorse, Anne Comfort took up the habit of writing in bed and soon became a literary success. In 1914 she, like Vorse, was sent to Europe to write about the effect of war on the civilian population. Having shed her husband, Comfort returned to Europe after the war in the hope that she could “describe the aftermath of war in such terms that people would see the horror and futility of it all.”

In Paris in 1919, Dos Passos had observed the meeting and early courtship of Mary Vorse and Robert Minor. In *Chosen Country*, the same scene is replayed when Anne Comfort encounters the American newspaperman Carl Humphries in Paris and falls in love with him at once. Fresh from the Soviet Union and Germany, and afire with revolutionary ideals, Humphries introduces her to a host of French radicals. Comfort pays the bills for Humphries, while he absent-mindedly pockets her change. “Carl
walked so fast Anne had trouble keeping up with him. He looked straight ahead and talked in staccato sentences about the march of the working class, with winded Anne "trotting at his heels. After that night she was only happy when she was with Carl."

Back in Greenwich Village after Paris, Humphries was often away on mysterious political business. Comfort waited patiently for his return and wrote silly love stories, "full of false values, to pay the grocery bills." After the war, her fiction didn't sell so well. Yet "the new radical magazines that came out after the wartime suppressions and the skimpy labor newspapers were delighted to publish her work, but they didn't pay. It all confirmed Anne in Carl's opinion that capitalism was rotten and revolution was the only cure. The trouble was that she had a lot of mouths to feed until the great day came. . . . She was always in debt. . . . When Carl was home it was worse because he insisted on her giving him so much money for the movement." Like Robert Minor, Carl Humphries was egotistical and growing deaf. Soon after his return from Paris, Humphries abruptly dumped Comfort to marry a woman more sympathetic to his politics. In U.S.A. Mary French had also been rejected by her Communist lover. But unlike Mary French, Anne Comfort weathers this moment of desertion with some grace. After all, "meetings and the movement took up her life, and of course she had the children and her career."

Once again, as in U.S.A., Dos Passos hauled out the old affair with Robert Minor as the central clue to Mary Vorse's personality. But Anne Comfort's radicalism had no more solid base than her love for Carl Humphries, whose role in the novel is the Communist villain without humanity or intellect. Anne Comfort, a well-meaning do-gooder, worshiped a flawed male deity, who in turn pursued the false God of the Party. In the end, both gods failed.24

The slur cast by Dos Passos on Mary Vorse's life was apparent. For him, a woman had no place in politics, radical or otherwise. If she were involved in matters of the world, her activity could only be dictated by a man. If a woman were manless, her political interests could only be compensation for her failure to realize the female destiny through a man. The story of Mary Vorse and Robert Minor was an admirable device to symbolize the betrayal of American idealists by communism, but Dos Passos returned to it for another, more important reason: The tale of Robert Minor's lack of concern for a decent woman, whose only fault was to love him too blindly, is another attempt by Dos Passos to deal with his central trauma regarding the relationship between his own parents. Above all, Dos Passos saw Mary Vorse as he saw his mother—good, brave, weak, and in need
of protection from the admired and powerful, but essentially cruel male whom she foolishly loved.25

Vorse left no comment in her archival collection about her response to her portrayal in *Chosen Country*. She had seen very little of Dos Passos since Katy’s death, and she felt guilty that she had not visited him in the nearby hospital during his recovery from the accident that killed Katy. By 1951, Dos Passos had become so reactionary that Vorse and most of her friends could no longer take his writing very seriously. Perhaps her disdain for his political art helped to soften the anger she must have felt toward him after the publication of *Chosen Country*.

Unlike Dos Passos’s portrayal of Vorse, Murray Kempton’s use of her life in *Part of Our Time: Some Ruins and Monuments of the Thirties* is not fictionally rendered. It is a direct statement of Kempton’s vision of her as one of the few monuments among the ruins. She stands as representative of the American radical, rare in any era, “who dared to stand alone, to whom no man called out in vain, to whom the lie was dishonorable and the crawl degrading.”

Published in 1955, *Part of Our Time* is marked by that close attention to the issue of American communism inevitably present in serious political works of that time. But Kempton is no shrill anti-Communist. His book is meant to show the pathos of the lives of those Communists and ex-Communists who were driven by ignorance, desperation, or social conscience into living a lie that finally left them tragic human ruins. Kempton belittles the fear of Communist influence held by HUAC and McCarthy supporters. He argues that American Communists, the dominant radical group of the thirties, were relatively unimportant in furthering the immense change in American society actually produced by fighting union members and New Deal officials. Briefly associated with the Communists himself in the thirties, Kempton concludes: “We were only a part of our time; it was our illusion that we were the most important part, but most Americans knew that we were not, and they were right.”26

*Part of Our Time*, now recognized as a classic on the thirties, is a series of perceptive novellas about real-life persons who held a revolutionary view of society in that decade. It is also a roll call of many of Vorse’s friends and acquaintances. Gardner “Pat” Jackson, Edmund Wilson, John Dos Passos, Sherwood Anderson, Malcolm Cowley, Albert Maltz, Philip Murray, and Walter, Victor, and Roy Reuther appear, as do other dissidents like Whittaker Chambers, Paul Robeson, Alger Hiss, Joe Curran, and Jim Farrell.

Kempton’s portrayal of Mary Vorse is deeply, almost achingly, admir-
ing. In contrast to the Communists he describes, whom he presents as generally without compassion or sophistication, Vorse has been driven by the purest motive of all—the fight for justice: "In all her life, Mary Heaton Vorse has had no involvements which did not lie upon the outermost extremities of love." She represents for him the "rebel girl" of Wobbly imagination:

The scorned and ragged rebels of the first three decades of the century might logically have considered the thirties a time of redemption in which their survivors would be treated as triumphant saints. It does not appear to have been that way for Mary Vorse, who in any case would hardly have asked so much. . . . Mary Vorse lived on because she found her love young and neither forsok nor was forsaken. For Mary Vorse had joined the avenging army in 1913, because men and women were suffering for its triumph.

"And there will be nothing bitter in her so long as she lives," Kempton wrote. "As Yeats said of another dedicated old lady, she needed upon her difficult road no spur of hate."

Kempton's portrayal of Mary Vorse left her at a CIO convention in 1949, during a coal strike.

She bore up under all the attentions for three days. Then the things of state were too much for her, and she went back to the coal mines, saying . . . "There's an old fellow in Charleroi I knew long ago in the Wobblies. He always tells me what's going on. I'll have to tell Phil [Murray]; he'll remember him. One of the old fellows, one of the very old ones."

And she was gone to the bus station, her legs a little stiff, her eyes a little rheumy, because she was, after all, seventy-five years old. To have pledged yourself and to have forsaken all others for forty years, to have understood that to love is to abandon sleep and comfort and the ease of age, and to follow, always to follow, the desperate road love sets out for you, such was the limit of the rebel girl's commitment. Mary Vorse sat in her bus as upon a burnished throne.

If Mary Vorse held no great place in men's memory called history, that was her own choice, Kempton wrote. In all the battles she wrote about, there was little about herself in the story. Having "abandoned all sense of profit," she simply followed her hard road, carefully recording "the conversations of persons in trouble," even in her old age "still in the game,
talking to the longshoremen the other reporters neglected for a series on the New York waterfront."

Like Dos Passos, Kempton felt compelled to bring up Vorse's affair with Robert Minor, but mentions Minor in only two short references. One sentence reads: “She was married awhile to Robert Minor, then a distinguished cartoonist and afterwards a Communist functionary.” The other states that when Vorse attended the 1949 CIO convention, she was so beloved by unionists that “Mary Vorse could have walked into that convention with Bob Minor on her arm, and Philip Murray, the CIO’s president, would have been glad to shake his hand.”

These references hardly seem to justify the rage Vorse felt toward Kempton for hanging “poor dead Minor like an albatross around my neck,” as she wrote in her diary.27 Her anger was partially a delayed reaction to Dos Passo’s attack on her in Chosen Country. It was also an outraged protest against the assumptions of a male-made world, which sought to define a woman's life and work chiefly through her relationship to a man.

It was actually not Kempton's book, but Richard Rovere's major review of it in the New Yorker, that most infuriated her. In his extensive piece, Rovere crammed into one very long sentence his entire discussion of Kempton's lengthy portrayal of the women characters in Part of Our Time. Rovere wrote: “The chilling story of Elizabeth Bentley, the plain, meek, respectable Vassar girl who became the mistress and slavey of a Soviet spy, and the chilling story of Ann Moos Remington, the hard case from Bennington who made her Dartmouth boy friend, the late William Remington, promise that he would never, never be unfaithful to the Communist Party, are told, along with that of Mary Heaton Vorse, a gay and venerable libertarian lady—never a Communist, though once fleetingly associated in matrimony with a man who later became one—of more deeply revolutionary instincts than either Miss Bentley or the former Mrs. Remington.”28

Was there no end to male arrogance? Did all her years of writing and struggle come to nothing more than that? Would she survive in history as a footnote—an appendage to the lesser life of Robert Minor?

Vorse came to regret deeply her initial rejection of Kempton’s piece. At a meeting of journalists following the publication of Part of Our Time, she discovered that “since Murray Kempton’s book I have become a legend. . . . I am always being introduced as our great (or greatest) reporter.” Later, at a union convention, she wrote: “I have a feeling that I have hurt Murray Kempton badly. He meant to pay me the highest compliment he probably could in calling me the Rebel Girl and the descendent of Joe Hill. I am
afraid he is right. I went into the labor movement with the singing of the Wobblies in my ears. He meant to give me a little bit of immortality. He meant to clear away the rumor that I was communist—and I didn’t even write him a line. . . . Murray will never forgive me and no wonder for not having thanked him for his book and his extravagant words of praise. He has been very cool ever since and didn’t ask me to lunch yesterday.” A year later she wrote in her diary, “Last night I read over what Murray Kempton wrote about me. . . . Surely no one had a few pages of such tenderness written about them. . . . I had not really read it in context until now. My [original] appalled reaction shows my self-protective coloration. . . . Now I see a skillful apologetic [in the reference to Minor] . . . to put me right as it were. The whole piece is a legend. How sensitive and aware the mind that wrote this.”

“Mary Vorse had gone on far past her time for going on,” Murray Kempton wrote in 1955. That very year, perhaps not coincidentally, Mary Vorse left “the hard road of her choice,” which he had described. At age eighty-one, she retired to her cherished Provincetown. She did not deceive herself. She knew this homecoming was the final one. Labor would have to find its way without her presence at the hot spots. The world could rock along without her reporting. As Kempton knew, even though “the chronicles which cover her life span had small room for her name,” Vorse “brought to her old age no need for survival. She had been not in history but of history.”

Her retirement was chosen and purposeful. It meant time for reading, for family and friends, for picking and canning beach plums. It promised long summer swims and the slow meandering walks she loved to take over the dunes to the sea. She felt healthy and welcomed the years left for leisure. And she had plans for writing two stories needing to be told—how it felt to grow old and what she had learned about men and women. That would be enough. “The house was mine,” she wrote. “With an indescribable feeling of peace I settled back into it.”