

# John L. Spivak:

## An Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

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### Descriptive Summary

<b>Creator</b>	Spivak, John L. (John Louis), 1897-1981
<b>Title</b>	John L. Spivak Papers
<b>Dates:</b>	1929-1948
<b>Extent:</b>	2 boxes (.84 linear feet)
<b>Abstract</b>	These papers document the research, writing, and response to Spivak's book <i>Georgia Nigger</i> (1932), a title he chose to be deliberately provocative. The papers consist of notes, draft manuscripts, and newspaper clippings created and collected by Spivak, an American journalist known for his investigative reporting and support of socialism.
<b>Call Number:</b>	Manuscript Collection MS-03939
<b>Language:</b>	English
<b>Access:</b>	Open for research. Researchers must create an online Research Account and agree to the Materials Use Policy before using archival materials.
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## Administrative Information

**Preferred Citation:** John L. Spivak Papers (Manuscript Collection MS-003939). Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

**Acquisition** Purchase, 1968 (R4276)

**Processed by** Jennifer B. Patterson, 1993

**Repository:** [Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin](#)

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## Biographical Sketch

John Louis Spivak was born on June 13, 1897, and grew up in New Haven, Connecticut. After a series of factory jobs, Spivak began a career in journalism as a police reporter with the *New Haven Union*. His antipathy for the patriotic hysteria of the late 1910s, coupled with an interest in socialism, politicized Spivak, who used his investigative skills to expose corruption and venality in American business and government. By 1919, Spivak was working as a freelance reporter for the American Socialist Party's paper, *The Call*, where he covered labor unrest in the West Virginia mines, going so far as to personally ask the White House to investigate the murders of unionizers and the Sacco-Vanzetti murder trial.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s Spivak travelled around the country and the world investigating corruption and inequality. He successfully proved that a New York police commissioner's "evidence" that labor unions were receiving funds from the U.S.S.R. were forged. He also investigated living conditions in Georgia prison camps and chain gangs, which he revealed in a book of fiction *Georgia Nigger*, a title he chose to be deliberately provocative. This book caused a sensation and is credited with curtailing the chain gang system in the South.

In the 1930s, Spivak investigated the rise of fascism. He was particularly interested in fascist infiltration in the United States, and worked with several anti-fascist and Jewish groups to expose German and Japanese propagandists and spies. His 1934 book *Plotting America's Pogroms* investigated Nazi groups in the United States, and he continued his reports with *Europe Under the Terror* (1936), which interviewed members of the anti-Nazi underground in Rome, Vienna, Berlin, Warsaw, and Prague. Spivak exposed a group of fascist sympathizers who were trying to foment a revolution in Mexico in order to divert American attention from Germany and Japan. His 1940 book, *The Shrine of the Silver Dollar*, led to the downfall of the anti-Semitic broadcaster, Father Charles Coughlin. Spivak's many exposés led the crusader and muckraker Lincoln Steffens to name him "the best of us."

Spivak retired from journalism in the 1960s and published an autobiography, *A Man in His Time*, in 1967. However, two years later, he became consumer affairs editor at a Pennsylvania newspaper, where he exposed a corrupt magazine sales scheme, which led to a new state consumer protection law. Spivak died September 30, 1981, in Philadelphia.

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## Scope and Contents

Although he had a long and productive career as a journalist, this collection reflects Spivak's work on only one book. The two boxes of reports, correspondence, creative works, and scrapbook material, 1929-1948 (bulk 1929-1933), document the publication of his deliberately provocatively titled book, *Georgia Nigger*, a condemnation of the racist brutality in the Georgia prison system. The material is arranged in three series: I. Documentation of Georgia Prison System, 1929-1931 (2 folders); II. Drafts and Other

Working Materials, undated (9 folders); and III. Reactions, 1932-1947 (7 folders)

Series I. Documentation of Georgia Prison Conditions includes reports and correspondence taken from Georgia state prison records. Spivak used these in the appendix of the book to document the conditions he fictionalized. Of particular interest are disciplinary and whipping reports, death notices of inmates, and written appeals from prisoners to the Prison Commissioner of Georgia, along with his responses. Much of the material is duplicated by photostats.

Series II. Drafts and Other Working Materials contains Spivak's notes, drafts, and prepublication materials associated with the publication of the book in 1932. Spivak's earliest attempts to expose the prison conditions were in the form of notes on prison conditions and African-Americans, cut into strips with handwritten categorizations like "camp," "migration," "torture," and "peonage." Two folders in this series contain these notes, as well as other research findings about African-Americans in the South. Four folders contain Spivak's first draft of the book, which is heavily corrected and modified. Materials originally paperclipped together by Spivak have been kept together in mylar sleeves. Many of these contain the paper strips found in his earliest notes, and illustrate how Spivak's historical and sociological research became a book of fiction. The series also contains two later drafts of the book, also annotated, as well as prepublication materials, including American and English edition dust jackets, and galley proofs. Of note, box 2, folder 1 includes an essay "Foreword from life" by Langston Hughes which was published as the Russian language foreword to a 1933 translation, *Negr iz dzhordzhii*.

Series III. Reactions consists of press releases, book reviews, newspaper articles, correspondence, and lecture announcements that show how the book was received in the United States and abroad. Spivak's book set off a storm of controversy when it was first released, as is illustrated by the many book reviews and newspaper articles found in the series. Of particular interest is the correspondence (2 folders), since the book attracted mail from sympathetic persons and organizations, and from angry Southerners. Much of the correspondence centers around the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the American Civil Liberties Union, both of which distributed copies of the book, and condemned the prison conditions that Spivak described. Correspondents of note include Will W. Alexander, Roger Nash Baldwin, Countee Cullen, Michael Gold, Walter White, George Foster Peabody, John Cowper Powys, and Mary Heaton Vorse. Scattered throughout the series in articles and correspondence is evidence of Spivak's efforts to halt the extradition of Robert E. Burns, author of *I Was a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang*.

A strength of the Spivak collection derives from its illustration of the creative process. Series II. traces the book from the author's earliest notes to the galley proofs. The collection also reflects conditions and movements in the United States in the early 1930s, particularly in the progressive community.

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## Related Material

Related to the Spivak Papers are 43 prints and negatives taken by Spivak documenting Georgia prison conditions and African-American life in the state. These were separated from the collection when it was first purchased, and are located in the Ransom Center's John L. Spivak Literary File Photography Collection (PH-02721).

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## Index Terms

### Correspondents

Alexander, William Winton, 1884-1956.  
Baldwin, Roger Nash, 1884- .  
Burns, Robert Elliott.  
Burns, Vincent Godfrey, 1893- .  
Carmon, Walt.  
Cecil, Edgar Algernon Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, viscount, 1864-1958.  
Cleghorn, Sarah Norcliffe, 1876-1959.  
Cullen, Countee, 1903-1946.  
Gold, Michael, 1894-1967.  
Lehman, Herbert H. (Herbert Henry), 1878-1963.  
Moss, Gordon W.  
Murphy, Carl.  
North, Joseph.  
Peabody, George Foster, 1852-1938.  
Powys, John Cowper, 1872-1963.  
Reavey, George, 1907- .  
Vann, Robert L., 1887-1940.  
Vorse, Mary Heaton, 1874-1966.  
Walters, Basil Leon, 1896-1975.  
Waymack, W. W. (William Wesley), 1888-1960.  
White, Walter Francis, 1893-1955.  
American Civil Liberties Union.  
Des Moines Register and Tribune Company.  
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.  
Prison Commission of Georgia.

**Subjects**

Afro-American prisoners--Georgia.

Convict labor--Georgia.

Prisons--Georgia.

**Document types**

Book reviews.

Death records.

Editorials.

First drafts.

Galley proofs.

Newspapers.

Photographs.

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**Series I. Documentation of Georgia Prison Conditions, 1929-1931**

Reports

**box 1 folder 1**

Correspondence, 1930-1931

**folder 2**

**Series II. Drafts and Other Working Materials, undated**

Notes	<b>box 1 folder 3-4</b>
Early draft	
Chapters 1-5	<b>box 1 folder 5</b>
Chapters 6-10	<b>folder 6</b>
Chapters 11-17	<b>folder 7-8</b>
Drafts, including Langston Hughes "Foreword from life", undated	<b>box 2 folder 1-2</b>
Prepublication materials	<b>folder 3</b>

**Series III. Reactions, 1932-1947**

Press releases	<b>box 2 folder 4</b>
Book reviews	<b>folder 5</b>
Articles, 1932-1937	<b>folder 6</b>
Articles, undated	<b>folder 7</b>
Correspondence A-J, 1932-1934	<b>folder 8</b>
Correspondence K-unidentified, 1932-1933	<b>folder 9</b>
Lectures and interviews	<b>folder 10</b>

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- Alexander, Will W. (Commission on Interracial Cooperation) (Filed under NAACP)--2.9
- American Civil Liberties Union--2.8
- Arbeiter Photo (Berlin)--2.8
- Baldwin, Roger N. (American Civil Liberties Union)--2.8
- Ballou, Robert (Brewer, Warren & Putnam, Inc.)--2.8
- Barnett, C.A. (Associated Negro Press)--2.8
- Battle, George--1.2
- Brown, Eugene--1.2
- Burns, Robert Elliott--2.8
- Burns, Vincent Godfrey (Union Church)--2.8
- Carmon, Walt (International Literature)--2.8
- Cecil, viscount (League of Nations) (Filed under NAACP)--2.9
- Chauvent, Ernest ( *Le Nouvelliste*) (Filed under NAACP)--2.9
- Cleghorn, Sarah N.--2.8
- Cohen, Elliot E. (National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners)--2.9
- Cromford, George--1.2
- Cowles, John ( *Des Moines Register*)--2.8
- Cullen, Countee--2.8
- *Daily Mirror*--2.8
- Davin, Tom (Hearst's International)--2.8
- *Des Moines Register*--2.8
- Fullilove, H.M. (St. Mary's Hospital) (Filed under F. Mallon)--1.2, 2.9
- Godley, Neeley--1.2
- Gold, Michael--2.8
- Handler, Charles--2.8
- Henson, W.C. (Finley & Henson) (Filed under ACLU)--2.8
- Hikida, Y.--2.9
- Kelleher, Agnes A. ( *Des Moines Register*)--2.8
- Kelley, William M. ( *Amsterdam News*) (Filed under NAACP)--2.9
- Klarin, A. (Bibliographisches Institut)--2.9
- Lehman, Herbert H.--2.9
- Little, Willie--1.2
- Lopashov, S. (State Central Library)--2.9
- Mallon, Frank E.--2.9
- Moore, Hon A. Harry (Filed under NAACP)--2.9
- Moss, Gordon W. (American Civil Liberties Union)--2.8
- Murphy, Carl ( *The Afro-American*)--2.8
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People--2.9
- North, Joseph ( *Labor Defender*) (Filed under NAACP)--2.9
- Peabody, George Foster--2.9
- Pocklington, G.R.--2.9
- Powys, John Cowper--2.9
- Prison Commission of Georgia--1.2
- Reavey, G. (Bureau of Litteraire Europeen)--2.8
- Rose, Ernestine (Harlem Adult Education Committee)--2.8
- S(h)ilensky, Morris (Hays, St. John, Abramson) (Filed under ACLU)--2.8
- Smith, L.T. (Filed under NAACP)--2.9

- Stanley, Vivian (Prison Commission of GA)--1.2
- Stoklitsky,?--2.9
- Thornton, S.W.--1.2
- Vann, Robert L. ( *Pittsburgh Courier*)--2.9
- Vorse, Mary Heaton--2.9
- Walters, Basil L. ( *Des Moines Register*)--2.8
- Waymack, W.W. ( *Des Moines Register*)--2.8
- Wells, O. (Worker's School)--2.9
- Wendell, Pauline--2.9
- West, T. Newell (Public Works and Roads, Ga.)--1.2
- White, Walter F. (NAACP)--2.9
- Zipper, Hans (Osterr, Rote Hilfe)--2.9