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Basic biographical data

Name:	Martin Abern
Other names (by-names, pseud. etc.):	Marty Abern ; Martin Abramowitz ; Henry Allen ; Harry Allen ; Harry Stone
Date and place of birth:	December 2, 1898, ? (Romania)
Date and place of death:	April ?, 1949, ?, USA
Nationality:	Romanian ; USA
Occupations, careers, etc.:	Party organizer
Time of activity in Trotskyist movement:	1928 - ca. 1946

Biographical sketch

There are only a few general biographical notes about Martin Abern, listed in the bibliography below. Our short sketch is chiefly based upon Glotzer, Albert: Abern, Martin (1898-1949), in: Biographical dictionary of the American Left, ed. by Bernard K. Johnpoll and Harvey Klehr; New York, NY, [etc.], 1986, pp. 1-2.

Martin Abramowitz was born in Bessarabia, the eastern part of Romania, on December 2, 1898 as a son of Jewish parents. In 1902 the family emigrated to the United States, settled in Minneapolis, Minnesota, became naturalized and assumed the name Abern. In Minneapolis Martin Abern attended both elementary and high school before enrolling at the *University of Minnesota* in 1914 where he was tolerated as a campus radical only because he was a star of the university's football team. After the United States had entered World War I, Abern was expelled from *Minnesota University* because he had refused the draft and was sentenced to a six-month prison term.

Having joined the ranks of the *IWW (Industrial Workers of the World)*¹ and of the *YPSL (Young People's Socialist League)*, the youth section of the *SP, Socialist Party* already at an early age, Abern together with the entire left wing of the *SP* and *YPSL* left the *Socialist Party* in 1919 and in face of the Bolshevik Russian revolution and of the launching of the *Comintern (Communist International)* became a founding member of the American communist movement². Abern was one of the leaders of the

1) The *IWW*, also known as *The Wobblies*, was launched in 1905 as a revolutionary industrial union movement. Many people of the first generation of American Trotskyists had been members of the *IWW* before or during World War I.

2) In 1919 *two* communist parties were launched simultaneously in the U.S. which both were driven to underground in early 1920 by governmental repression. In 1920 both parties united while in 1921 another *CP* was founded which in 1922 split in 2 parties of the same name, *Communist Party of America*. Both underground *CPs* set up legal, open parties: *Workers' Party of America* and *United Toilers of*

CPUSA's youth group and as the leader of the youth delegation from the U.S. attended the 2nd congress of the *Communist Youth International* which was held in Moscow in 1922 in connection with the 4th world congress of the *Comintern* where Abern as a delegate represented the half-legal American CP. He became elected the youngest member of CP's *Central Committee* in 1920 and served as secretary and party organizer in Minnesota in 1920-1921 before going to Chicago, Illinois, serving there as national secretary of the *YWL (Young Workers League)*, the youth branch of the CP, closely co-operating with young Max Shachtman. As a member of the *Central Committee* of the CPUSA Abern sided with James P. Cannon in the latter's factional controversies with the party majority led by William Zebulon Foster. In those years Abern also served as assistant national secretary of the *ILD (International Labor Defense)*, a communist-led mass, or, front organization, taking active part in the defence work for Sacco and Vanzetti.

Shortly after the expulsion of the Trotskyist and Zinovievist left opposition from the CPSU (*Communist Party of the Soviet Union*) and the cleansing of the leading bodies of the *Comintern* from their adherents, the American left oppositionists were excluded from the CPUSA in the autumn of 1928. At that time the American left (Trotskyist) opposition officially called itself *Opposition Group in the Workers (Communist) Party of America*, led by James P. Cannon, Martin Abern and Max Shachtman.

Shortly after their expulsion from the CP they launched the weekly paper *The Militant*, the first issue of which appeared on November 15, 1928. The American (and Canadian) adherents of the *ILO (International Left Opposition)* led by Leon Trotsky gathered around *The Militant*; Abern belonged to *The Militant's* editorial board as did Shachtman and Cannon, too; some weeks later they were joined by the talented union organizer Arne Swabeck and by Maurice Spector, who had been expelled as a Trotskyist from the Canadian CP.

In May 1929 at a convention held at Chicago, these men – together with their followers and supporters – founded the *CLA (Communist League of America)* which became the American section of the *International Left Opposition*. From the very beginning of CLA, Abern was a member of its *National and Political Committee*, the leading bodies of this party.

When in 1934 the CLA fused with Abraham J. Muste's *AWP (American Workers' Party)* to form the *Workers' Party*, Abern belonged to the leadership of this new party, too, which eventually dissolved in 1936 when under the slogan of entryism the majority of the American Trotskyists individually joined the ranks of Norman Thomas' *Socialist Party (SP)*, from which, however, they were expelled already in the summer of the following year.

On January 1, 1938 Abern belonged to the founding members of the *SWP (Socialist Workers Party)* which became the U.S. section³ of Trotsky's *Fourth International* after it was formally launched in September 1938. Together with the other just-mentioned founding fathers of American Trotskyism as well as with some other outstanding activists of the left oppositional current of the American worker's and trade union movement, Abern was elected a member of the *National Committee of the SWP* and served on its *Political Committee*, too.

However, within less than two years after the *SWP* had been constituted, serious differences about some fundamental political questions arose – particularly about the question of the class character of the USSR – in face of the Hitler-Stalin-pact and the unfolding World War II. The main antagonists in these factional struggles and theoretical debates were James P. Cannon on the one, and Max Shachtman, James Burnham and Martin Abern on the other side. In 1940 these three *SWP* leaders left the party together with a considerable part of its membership and with the majority of the party youth, forming a new *Workers' Party*⁴ which some nine years later should be renamed *Independent Socialist*

America. In 1923 the American communists emerged from underground joining forces with the (legal) *Workers' Party of America* which in 1925 was renamed *Workers' (Communist) Party of America* before in 1926 changing its name again: *Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA)*. We are using this initialism (CPUSA) passim.

3) Until (official) affiliation was prohibited under the Smith Act in 1940.

4) Also known as *Workers' Party III (WP III)* in order not to confuse with the *WP* launched in 1934 or with the *CP* which for a certain span of time also had been called *Workers' Party (of America)*. James Burnham divorced from Shachtman and Abern already in 1940 and shifted rapidly to the right. Shachtman successively took reformist positions and his *WP* eventually dissolved into the *Socialist Party* in 1958.

League after abandoning Trotskyism at the end of the World War. Abern, who had taken a very active part in the internal struggles preceding the split, was elected to the *National Committee* of the new *Workers' Party*. After World War II he had to reduce his activities in face of deteriorating health. Martin Abern died of a heart attack in April 1949.
[Further biographical details not known.]

*Selective bibliography*⁵

- ***Selective bibliography: Books, collections, journals, bulletins to which Abern contributed***

The fate of the Russian revolution / ed. by Sean Matgamna. - London : Phoenix Pr., 1998. - 603 pp. - (Lost texts of critical Marxism ; 1)
Internal Bulletin / Communist League of America (Opposition) (New York, NY) <TSB 0358>
Internal Bulletin / Socialist Workers Party (New York, NY) <TSB 1548>
Workers Monthly (Washington, DC)

- ***Selective bibliography: Books and articles about Abern***

Couret, Daniel: [Biographical sketch], in: *Dissidences : bulletin de liaison des études sur les mouvements révolutionnaires*, 2.2000 (7), pp. 29-30.
Glotzer, Albert: [Biographical sketch], in: *Biographical dictionary of the American left / ed. by Bernhard K. Johnpoll [et al.]*, New York, NY, 1986, pp. 1-2.
Hansen, Joseph: The Abern clique / Joseph Hansen. - New York, NY : Nat. Education Dept., Socialist Workers Party, 1972. - 32 pp. - (Education for socialists)

Note: More informations about Martin Abern is likely to be found in some of the books, pamphlets, university works and articles listed in the relevant chapter(s) of the *Lubitz' Leon Trotsky Bibliography [ISSN 2190-0183]*, e.g. in chapter [7.5.18](#).

Notes on archives

The *Papers of Martin Abern* form part of the *John Dwyer Collection (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Mich.)*; John Dwyer in 1947 had obtained this large collection of documents of the American communist and Trotskyist movements which Abern had assembled. Archival material by Abern is also to be found in the *Max Shachtman Papers (Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Elmer Bobst Library, New York, NY)*, in the *Eastman Papers (Manuscript Department, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind.)*. Abern's letter exchange with Trotsky is contained in *The Exile Papers of Lev Trotskii* (call phrase: bMS Russ 13.1) forming part of the famous Trotsky Archives at *Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.*⁶

Wolfgang and Petra Lubitz, 2005,
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5) TSB item numbers (e.g. <TSB 0716>) refer to Lubitz' *Trotskyist Serials Bibliography*, München [etc.] : Saur, 1993, which is out of print but [available as PDF file](#) within the framework of *Lubitz' TrotskyanaNet*. In TSB you can find detailed descriptions concerning the respective Trotskyist journals, newsletters, bulletins and the like.

6) For some details on U.S. public archives relevant to Trotsky(ism) research see the *Archives : America* chapter within the framework of our *Lubitz' TrotskyanaNet* website.