

## Investigating “Subversives”

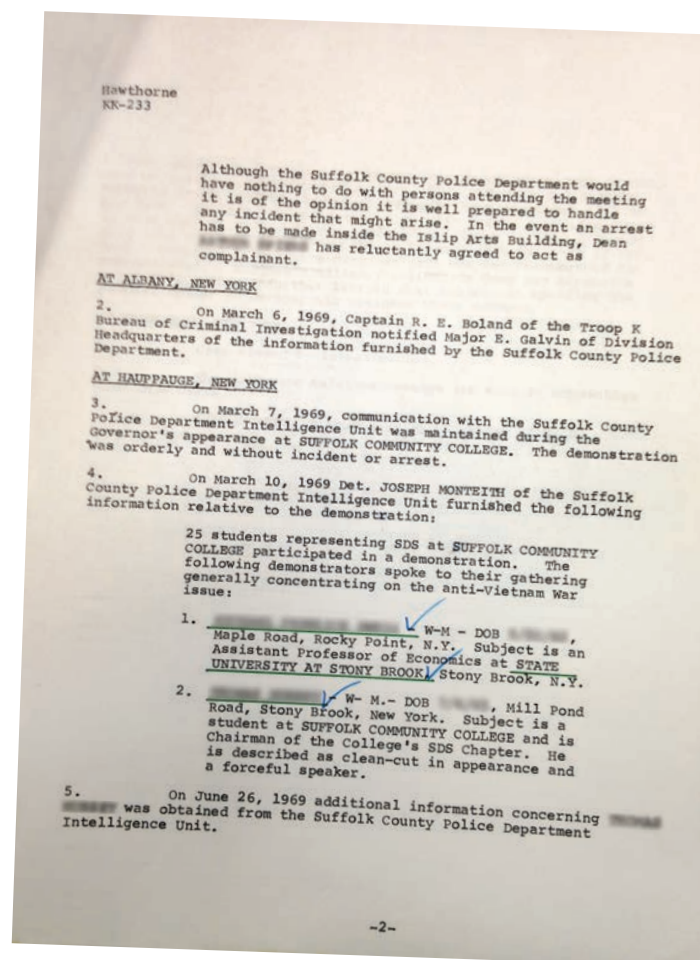
BY SETH KERSHNER

On February 19, 1965, a small student group organized the first anti-Vietnam War demonstration at Syracuse University. They had originally planned to hold a series of short speeches, but it was so cold and windy that the speakers stayed home. Still, around a dozen maintained an icy vigil outside the campus chapel, circulating petitions and holding protest signs. While other students distributed antiwar leaflets to passersby, the committee’s spokesperson, a graduate student in political science, agreed to speak with a man claiming to be a reporter. After sharing his views on the situation in Vietnam, the spokesperson and his fellow activists posed for a series of photographs. Unbeknownst to the group, the man was an undercover State Police investigator who later forwarded the students’ names, photographs, and organizational affiliations to police headquarters in Albany for placement in the agency’s “subversive” files.

Such sophisticated surveillance of nonviolent protesters was a major focus of the New York State Police during the turbulent 1960s and ’70s, a time of social and political upheaval in the US. Along with the largest antiwar movement up to that point in the nation’s history, the period saw the emergence of the Black Power, women’s liberation, and prisoners’ rights movements. In response to the unprecedented upsurge in political and social movements—particularly

the campus-based New Left—preexisting frameworks for maintaining the status quo expanded and strengthened.

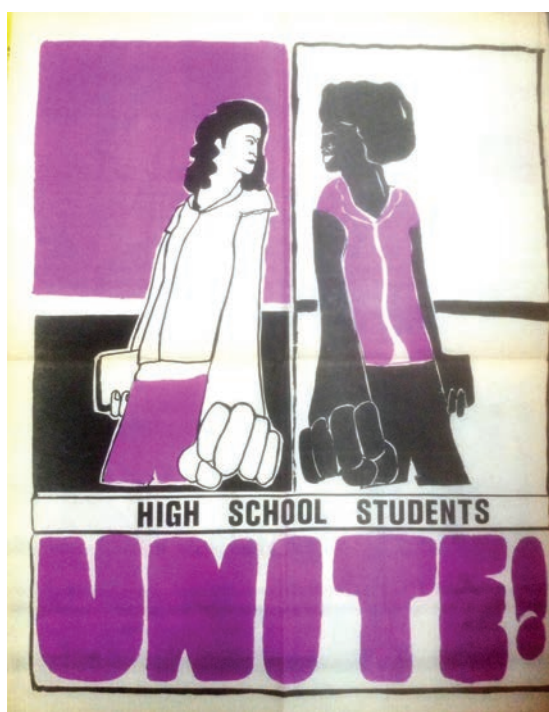
While the FBI was the undisputed leader in the field of policing ideas, they were hardly alone. In the 1960s and ’70s, there were at least ten county and city police agencies in New York State that actively



*With the rise of protest movements, BCI personnel tried to monitor virtually every public demonstration.*

NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES

For classroom activities related to this article, see our Educator Guide at <https://considerthesourceny.org/magazine-educator-guides>



Records in the collection offer insight into the strategies of social movement activists and their organizations.

Governor Nelson Rockefeller, the State Police expanded in all areas, and by 1969 there were twenty full-time investigators assigned to the BCI's Special Services Unit, which had previously operated under the moniker "Criminal and Subversives Section." The unit maintained lists of "subversive" individuals and organizations throughout the state, working closely with FBI field offices and local police intelligence units. They maintained a sprawling informant network on New York State's high school and college campuses. The contents of State

Archives in New York City in 2008. This record collection contains many State Police non-criminal investigation files pertaining to New York City that were not transferred to the State Archives.

For historians of the 1960s and 1970s, the *New York State Division of State Police Non-Criminal Investigation Case Files* offer insights into the strategies of social movement activists and their organizations and provide a glimpse into the thinking of police agents who recorded speeches and photographed participants at protests.

---

With the rise of protest movements in the mid-1960s, Special Services personnel tried to monitor every public demonstration. If they couldn't be at a protest or march, they arranged to have fellow "red-hunters" in municipal police intelligence units cover the event.

---

spied on antiwar activists, civil rights leaders, and anyone else who advocated for social change. These secretive police intelligence units ranged in size from the New York Police Department's sprawling Bureau of Special Services, to two- or three-man operations in smaller cities like Albany, Syracuse, and Mount Vernon. One of the most wide-ranging spying efforts was carried out by the investigative and detective arm of the New York State Police (NYSP), the Bureau of Criminal Investigation (BCI).

In addition to investigating homicides, robberies, and other crimes, the BCI had long been involved in so-called "counter-subversive" work. Under

Police intelligence reports were routinely passed on to academic authorities, employers, and other law enforcement agencies.

Lawsuits brought public scrutiny to police surveillance operations in the 1970s, and many agencies destroyed their intelligence files. The outcome was different in the case of the NYSP. After negative press and a legislative inquiry led the State Police to wind down its spy operations in the mid '70s, State Archives officials exercised their statutory authority to acquire their intelligence files—more than 100 boxes—and make them available to researchers. In addition, the intelligence records of the NYPD were preserved and transferred to the Municipal

With the rise of protest movements in the mid-1960s, Special Services personnel tried to monitor every public demonstration. If they couldn't be at a protest or march, they arranged to have fellow "red-hunters" in municipal police intelligence units cover the event. Reports on protest activities usually contain a description of who was present, photographs of the scene, and transcriptions of speeches. The files contain news clippings, along with flyers and periodicals produced by the activists. In many cases, investigators were observing short-lived groups of students or concerned citizens who didn't keep careful records of their own. In this way, BCI investigators acted as "accidental

archivists," collecting materials produced by local activists that no one but the police would have thought to preserve. To take one of many possible examples, the *Non-Criminal Investigation Files* have what may be the only newsletters produced by local upstate chapters of Students for a Democratic Society, the primary organization of the New Left.

The files also offer a range of insights into social movements of the postwar United States. For example, one investigative file from 1969—the outcome of a collaboration between the Albany police intelligence division and the BCI—essentially maps out the Capital District's New Left, including the names of key activists as well as locations of leftwing coffee houses and bookstores. The BCI notably investigated some rightwing activities as well.

While the collection can certainly be mined for insights about urban struggles for justice in places like Rochester and Syracuse, the most exhaustive records appear to have been accumulated in more rural areas. For example, the BCI's countersubversive squad regularly traveled to the Catskills in the late 1960s and early '70s to produce more than 100 pages of surveillance reports about a weekly peace vigil in Ellenville.

The *Non-Criminal Investigation Files* also show how the state's community colleges—many of which were in rural areas—were hotbeds of antiwar and New Left activity. At Sullivan County Community College, anti-Vietnam War organizing by students and faculty so angered conservative members of the county legislature that they threatened to cut funds



NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES

Activists in Buffalo produced and distributed a radical paper for working-class youth and students.

to the school. Antiwar actions at Orange County Community College were apparently so concerning that by 1968 its campus was honeycombed with informants reporting to the FBI, the State Police, and the school's administration. Since most community college students were from relatively low-income backgrounds, telling the history of protest on two-year campuses gives historians another angle to counter the persistent myth that the anti-Vietnam War movement failed to penetrate working-class sectors. Consulting police intelligence files in studies of social movements adds an

entire dimension of state power to the historical narrative.

Researchers can locate the finding aid for the *New York State Division of State Police Non-Criminal Investigation Case Files (A0795)* at [www.archives.nysed.gov](http://www.archives.nysed.gov), although some files are exempt from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Law. Such materials include information whose disclosure would result in an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy, or reveal the identity of confidential informants. In addition, disclosure of criminal history reports ("rap sheets") is prohibited by state and federal law. ■