

Undercover Girl: The Lesbian Informant Who Helped the FBI Bring Down the Communist Party

Lisa E. Davis

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Davis ensures that Calomiris will not slip quietly into obscurity, instead preserving her uncomfortable part in the Red Scare.

Undercover Girl is the biography of Angela Calomiris, a Greenwich Village lesbian who worked with the FBI during the Red Scare. Historian and writer Lisa E. Davis brings together oral histories and archival research to understand why Calomiris so readily informed on and publicly testified against her own friends and neighbors, the supposed Communist fifth-columnists who were trying to bring down the United States.

Nothing in her life as a mediocre photographer and overtly butch lesbian would indicate Calomiris's future with the conservative FBI, yet it was those traits, and her fierce sense of self-preservation, that made her a valuable asset. Her prioritization of self would later complicate her relationship with FBI, especially as she worked to leverage her moment in the public eye into a permanent career. Eventually discarded by the FBI and shunned by her former communities, Calomiris was forced to end the chapter of her life as an informant, and make a new life in a country that remembered the Red Scare with shame.

Davis's work is sharp and clear, not just in her assessment of Calomiris, but also in acknowledging source limitations. Given the private nature of Calomiris's personal and professional lives, available resources are clouded by the self-censorship of marginalized communities and the black marker of government censors. From the remaining fragments, Davis pulls together a remarkably solid biography with full disclosures where details are from questionable sources.

This is a biography with a specific focus. While Calomiris's early years of hardship and final years in Rhode Island are mentioned, they are always positioned in relation to her involvement with the Red Scare. The result captures a snapshot of both Calomiris and of the moment of history that she would be forever tied to.

Davis has helped to ensure that Calomiris will not slip quietly into obscurity, taking with her uncomfortable questions of loyalty, survival, and the responsibilities of community. Calomiris's life is of particular importance to those who exist outside of dominant society. She was the most feared kind of snitch—an undercover agent born into her “cover,” who used this shared identity to play upon her comrades' trust.

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