

**The Cases of Ezra Pound and Alger Hiss: An Examination of the Use of Psychiatry
as a Weapon against Political Dissidents**

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Abstract

This paper examines the interaction between psychiatry and politics, specifically, cases that are not specifically about psychiatric issues, but in which psychiatry and mental illness are drawn into the political discourse. Two very extreme examples include the diagnoses of political dissidents in the Soviet Union as mentally ill and their involuntary hospitalization as a way of removing them from the public eye and, more recently, similar repressive tactics directed at members of the Falun Gong in China.

There are any number of less extreme examples where psychiatry, and conceptions of mental health, enter political discourse in the United States. Yet at other times, similarly charged political battles are waged without the use of psychiatry or references to mental health. Under what circumstances then does psychiatry enter political battles? At what point is psychiatry introduced into the fray? How is psychiatry positioned in relation to the other forces being used in the overall political strategy?

This paper considers these questions in greater detail using two historical cases—the indictment for treason and ultimate hospitalization of Ezra Pound in 1945 and the Alger Hiss trials in 1949 and 1950 in which the defense attempted to discredit the key witness for the prosecution using psychiatric testimony. These two cases offer an interesting point of comparison. They both occur in the same time period; they involve the use of psychiatry in conjunction with a legal case revolving around political ideology; and they involve opposite ends of the political spectrum.

The analysis compares the circumstances surrounding the use of psychiatry in each case—what psychiatric evidence was used, how it was presented, and if and how it was refuted—and examines the role of psychiatry in the overall strategy by considering other tactics that were used, if any, and the ways in which they were presented and refuted as well.