

Saul David Alinsky

 *Dictionary of American Biography, 1994*

Born: January 30, 1909 in Chicago, Illinois, United States

Died: June 12, 1972 in Carmel, California, United States

Other Names: Alinsky, Saul David

Nationality: American

Occupation: Community activist

Alinsky, Saul David (Jan. 30, 1909 - June 12, 1972), radical activist, community organizer, and author, was born in Chicago, the son of Benjamin Alinsky and Sarah Tannenbaum, recent Jewish immigrants from Russia. His father was a tailor and a landlord. Saul's younger brother died in [childhood](#); he had two half brothers and a half sister from his father's earlier marriage. Following his parents' divorce, Saul spent most of his time with his mother in Chicago.

After graduation from Marshall High School, Saul attended the University of Chicago from 1926 to 1930, studying urban problems and field research with some of that institution's world-famous sociologists. He graduated with a Bachelor of Philosophy degree, and for the next two years he did graduate study in criminology at the University of Chicago. In June 1932, he married Helene Simon of Philadelphia, whom he had met while an undergraduate.

In the 1930's, Alinsky was a member of Clifford Shaw's staff in the Institute for Juvenile Research. Shaw argued that delinquency resulted from the disorganization of American urban society rather than from the disorganization of the individual. Alinsky also served as a criminologist at Joliet State Prison from 1933 to 1935.

After returning to Shaw's organization from Joliet in 1939, Alinsky became involved in organizing Chicago's notorious stockyards neighborhood the Back of the Yards. This led to an acrimonious break between the two men, as Shaw felt this was outside the work of his institute. With the assistance of Roman Catholic archbishop Bernard Sheil, Alinsky created the Industrial Areas Foundation to continue his organizing efforts and headed the foundation until his [death](#).

Alinsky's philosophy was that many of the problems of urban slums resulted from the feeling of powerlessness among poor urban dwellers. The traditional social work approach did not work because people from outside the community dictated to the urban poor. Alinsky's goal was to create viable organizations through which people could take control of their own lives. He felt that a functioning group could be created in three years. This approach often brought him into conflict with the social work establishment, the traditional political power structure, and the upper class.

The Back of the Yards Council first exemplified the success of Alinsky's methods. Subsequent attempts to create similar organizations in Kansas City and South St. Paul were less successful because of a lack of funding and trained organizers. More might have been achieved, but the outbreak of World War II channeled Alinsky's activities into other areas. A childhood injury prevented any military service, and Alinsky spent the war years improving worker morale for the War Manpower Board.

From the late 1940's until the middle of the next decade, Alinsky's professional and personal career reached its nadir. Helene Alinsky drowned in 1947, though she successfully rescued two children from Lake

Michigan. As he was recovering from this loss, another close friend died suddenly of polio. These two tragedies sapped his enthusiasm for work. Moreover, the beginning of the McCarthy era made support difficult for one who called himself a radical. Despite such problems, Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation had some success organizing Mexican Americans in California.

In 1952, Alinsky married Jean Graham, who soon manifested symptoms of multiple sclerosis. They divorced in 1969, and he married Irene McGinnis in 1971. In 1949, Alinsky authored a laudatory biography of labor leader John L. Lewis. Funding from the Schartzhaupt Foundation kept the Industrial Areas Foundation a viable, though small and personal, organization. Another major source of support was Monsignor John O'Grady of Catholic Charities.

Alinsky continued organizing, with varying degrees of success, in several California cities; Lackawanna, N.Y.; and [New York City](#). Lack of experienced organizers, inadequate funding, the hostility of the social work establishment, and Alinsky's penchant for personal control prevented expansion of his work. When, because of other involvements, he did not take personal control, organization was indifferent and not always successful. Moreover, a weakness in the Alinsky approach was his tenet that organizations should be self-sustaining in three years. Some of his groups, upon maturing, became new establishments whose ultimate aims were not what Alinsky would have wished. One example was that the Back of the Yards Council worked assiduously to prevent integration of that area.

In 1961, Alinsky broke new ground when he took on the City of Chicago and his alma mater with the creation of the Temporary Woodlawn Organization. The normal problems of a rundown urban area were exacerbated by the university's expansion plans. This was one of the first attempts to organize a northern urban black community. A number of Alinsky's new tactics were pioneered in this struggle. Because urban blacks lacked political muscle, a caravan of buses delivered citizens to City Hall to register to vote. Other tactics aimed at legally embarrassing the establishment were tested or threatened.

Following serious race rioting in Rochester, N.Y., in the summer of 1964, Alinsky was invited to that city to organize the black community. FIGHT (Freedom, Integration, God, Honor--Today), the Rochester organization, successfully pressed its demands against both the city and the Eastman Kodak Corporation. Again, there was emphasis on using embarrassment and ridicule as organizing methods. While these unified Alinsky's clients, they led others to question Alinsky's good taste. In the struggle with Eastman Kodak, Alinsky also successfully used stock proxies as a major weapon.

The last years of Alinsky's life were spent in trying to shift emphasis from direct organization to creating an institute that would train larger numbers of organizers for urban communities. Aware of his own mortality, he wanted to ensure that others would continue his work. While visiting Carmel, Calif., Alinsky died of a heart attack on June 12, 1972.

Although variously called a Marxist, a fascist, a conservative, a cynic, and a tool of the Roman Catholic church, Alinsky was none of these. He was arrogant and eloquent; he could be smooth or abrasive to achieve what he felt were desirable goals. None who met him were neutral or indifferent. Alinsky was loved, hated, and feared. Despite his immigrant roots, Alinsky was a home-grown radical firmly rooted in American traditions. James Madison of the *Federalist Papers* and, to a lesser extent, Thomas Jefferson as a populist were his sources of inspiration. His lifelong goal was to help the poor and unorganized gain control over their own destinies and to help the urban underclass fully participate in American democracy. He firmly believed that neither government nor an elite should determine the fate of the urban poor.

Further Readings

[The best source of Alinsky materials is the Industrial Areas Foundation. Though a prolific lecturer in his later years, and the author of some articles and papers, books written by Saul Alinsky are relatively few. These include *Reveille for Radicals* (1946); *John L. Lewis: An Unauthorized Biography* (1949); and *Rules for Radicals* (1971). There are two useful biographies of Alinsky: P. David Finks, *The Radical Vision of Saul Alinsky* (1984); and Sanford Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel* (1989). Donald Reitzes, *The Alinsky Legacy* (1987), is an episodic and anecdotal account of Alinsky and his work; it may be the most readable.]

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