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The CIA and the Cultural Cold War Revisited

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Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books), £20.

This book provides a detailed account of the ways in which the CIA penetrated and influenced a vast array of cultural organizations, through its front groups and via friendly philanthropic organizations like the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. The author, Frances Stonor Saunders, details how and why the CIA ran cultural congresses, mounted exhibits, and organized concerts. The CIA also published and translated well-known authors who toed the Washington line, sponsored abstract art to counteract art with any social content and, throughout the world, subsidized journals that criticized Marxism, communism, and revolutionary politics and apologized for, or ignored, violent and destructive imperialist U.S. policies. The CIA was able to harness some of the most vocal exponents of intellectual freedom in the West in service of these policies, to the extent that some intellectuals were directly on the CIA payroll. Many were knowingly involved with CIA "projects," and others drifted in and out of its orbit, claiming ignorance of the CIA connection *after* their CIA sponsors were publicly exposed during the late 1960s and the Vietnam war, after the turn of the political tide to the left.

U.S. and European anticommunist publications receiving direct or indirect funding included *Partisan Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *New Leader*, *Encounter* and many others. Among the intellectuals who were funded and promoted by the CIA were Irving Kristol, Melvin Lasky, Isaiah Berlin, Stephen Spender, Sidney Hook, Daniel Bell, Dwight MacDonal, Robert Lowell, Hannah Arendt, Mary McCarthy, and numerous others in the United States and Europe. In Europe, the CIA was particularly interested in and promoted the "Democratic Left" and ex-leftists, including Ignacio Silone, Stephen Spender, Arthur Koestler, Raymond Aron, Anthony Crosland, Michael Josselson, and George Orwell.

The CIA, under the prodding of Sidney Hook and Melvin Lasky, was instrumental in funding the Congress for Cultural Freedom, a kind of cultural NATO that grouped together all sorts of "anti-Stalinist" leftists and rightists. They were completely free to defend Western cultural and political values, attack "Stalinist totalitarianism" and to tiptoe gently around U.S. racism and imperialism. Occasionally, a piece marginally critical of U.S. mass society was printed in the CIA-subsidized journals.

What was particularly bizarre about this collection of CIA-funded intellectuals was not only their political partisanship, but their pretense that they were disinterested seekers of truth, iconoclastic humanists, freespirited intellectuals, or artists for art's sake, who counterposed themselves to the corrupted "committed" house "hacks" of the Stalinist apparatus.

It is impossible to believe their claims of ignorance of CIA ties. How could they ignore the absence in the journals of any basic criticism of the numerous lynchings throughout the southern United States during the whole period? How could they ignore the absence, during their cultural congresses, of criticism of U.S. imperialist intervention in Guatemala, Iran, Greece, and Korea that led to millions of deaths? How could they ignore the gross apologies of every imperialist crime of their day in the journals in which they wrote? They were all soldiers: some glib, vitriolic, crude, and polemical, like Hook and Lasky; others elegant essayists like Stephen Spender or self-righteous informers like George Orwell. Saunders portrays the WASP Ivy League elite at the CIA holding the strings, and the vitriolic Jewish ex-leftists snarling at leftist dissidents. When the truth came out in the late 1960s and New York, Paris, and London "intellectuals" feigned indignation at having been used, the CIA retaliated. Tom Braden, who directed the International Organizations Branch of the CIA, blew their cover by detailing how they all had to have known who paid their salaries and stipends (397-404).

According to Braden, the CIA financed their "literary froth," as CIA hardliner Cord Meyer called the anti-Stalinist intellectual exercises of Hook, Kristol, and Lasky. Regarding the most prestigious and best-known publications of the self-styled "Democratic Left" (*Encounter*, *New Leader*, *Partisan Review*), Braden wrote that the money for them came from the CIA and that "an agent became the editor of *Encounter*" (398). By 1953, Braden wrote, "we were operating or influencing international organizations in every field" (398).

Saunders' book provides useful information about several important questions regarding the ways in which CIA intellectual operatives defended U.S. imperialist interests on cultural fronts. It also initiates an important discussion of the long-term consequences of the ideological and artistic positions defended by CIA intellectuals.

Saunders refutes the claims (made by Hook, Kristol, and Lasky) that the CIA and its friendly foundations provided aid with no strings attached. She demonstrates that "the individuals and institutions subsidized by the CIA were expected to perform as part ... of a propaganda war." The most effective propaganda was defined by the CIA as the kind where "the subject moves in the direction you desire for reasons which he believes to be his own." While the CIA allowed their assets on the "Democratic Left" to prattle occasionally about social reform, it was the "anti-Stalinist" polemics and literary diatribes against Western Marxists and Soviet writers and artists that they were most interested in, funded most generously, and promoted with the greatest visibility. Braden referred to this as the "convergence" between the CIA and the European "Democratic Left" in the fight against communism. The collaboration between the "Democratic Left" and the CIA included strike-breaking in France, informing on Stalinists (Orwell and Hook), and covert smear campaigns to prevent leftist artists from receiving recognition (including Pablo Neruda's bid for a Nobel Prize in 1964 [351]).

The CIA, as the arm of the U.S. government most concerned with fighting the cultural Cold War, focused on Europe in the period immediately following the Second World War. Having

experienced almost two decades of capitalist war, depression, and postwar occupation, the overwhelming majority of European intellectuals and trade unionists were anticapitalist and particularly critical of the hegemonic pretensions of the United States. To counter the appeal of communism and the growth of the European Communist Parties (particularly in France and Italy), the CIA devised a two-tier program. On the one hand, as Saunders argues, certain European authors were promoted as part of an explicitly "anticommunist program." The CIA cultural commissar's criteria for "suitable texts" included "whatever critiques of Soviet foreign policy and Communism as a form of government we find to be objective (sic) and convincingly written and timely." The CIA was especially keen on publishing disillusioned ex-communists like Silone, Koestler, and Gide. The CIA promoted anticommunist writers by funding lavish conferences in Paris, Berlin, and Bellagio (overlooking Lake Como), where objective social scientists and philosophers like Isaiah Berlin, Daniel Bell, and Czeslaw Milosz preached their values (and the virtues of Western freedom and intellectual independence, within the anticommunist and pro-Washington parameters defined by their CIA paymasters). None of these prestigious intellectuals dared to raise any doubts or questions regarding U.S. support of the mass killing in colonial Indochina and Algeria, the witch hunt of U.S. intellectuals or the paramilitary (Ku Klux Klan) lynchings in the southern United States. Such banal concerns would only "play into the hands of the Communists," according to Sidney Hook, Melvin Lasky, and the *Partisan Review* crowd, who eagerly sought funds for their quasi-bankrupt literary operation. Many of the so-called prestigious anticommunist literary and political journals would long have gone out of business were it not for CIA subsidies, which bought thousands of copies that it later distributed free.

The second cultural track on which the CIA operated was much more subtle. Here, it promoted symphonies, art exhibits, ballet, theater groups, and well-known jazz and opera performers with the explicit aim of neutralizing anti-imperialist sentiment in Europe and creating an appreciation of U.S. culture and government. The idea behind this policy was to showcase U.S. culture, in order to gain cultural hegemony to support its military-economic empire. The CIA was especially keen on sending black artists to Europe -- particularly singers (like Marion Anderson), writers, and musicians (such as Louis Armstrong) -- to neutralize European hostility toward Washington's racist domestic policies. If black intellectuals didn't stick to the U.S. artistic script and wandered into explicit criticism, they were banished from the list, as was the case with writer Richard Wright.

The degree of CIA political control over the intellectual agenda of these seemingly nonpolitical artistic activities was clearly demonstrated by the reaction of the editors of *Encounter* (Lasky and Kristol, among others) with regard to an article submitted by Dwight MacDonald. MacDonald, a maverick anarchist intellectual, was a long-time collaborator with the CIA-run Congress for Cultural Freedom and *Encounter*. In 1958, he wrote an article for *Encounter* entitled "America America," in which he expressed his revulsion for U.S. mass culture, its crude materialism, and lack of civility. It was a rebuttal of the American values that were prime propaganda material in the CIA's and *Encounter*'s cultural war against communism. MacDonald's attack of the "decadent American imperium" was too much for the CIA and its intellectual operatives in *Encounter*. As Braden, in his guidelines to the intellectuals, stated "organizations receiving CIA funds should not be required to support every aspect of U.S. policy," but invariably there was a cut-off point -- particularly where U.S. foreign policy was concerned (314). Despite the fact that MacDonald was a former editor of *Encounter*, the article was rejected. The pious claims of Cold War writers like

Nicola Chiaromonte, writing in the second issue of *Encounter*, that "[t]he duty that no intellectual can shirk without degrading himself is the duty to expose fictions and to refuse to call 'useful lies,' truths," certainly did not apply to *Encounter* and its distinguished list of contributors when it came to dealing with the 'useful lies' of the West.

One of the most important and fascinating discussions in Saunders' book is about the fact that CIA and its allies in the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) poured vast sums of money into promoting Abstract Expressionist (AE) painting and painters as an antidote to art with a social content. In promoting AE, the CIA fought off the right-wing in Congress. What the CIA saw in AE was an "anti-Communist ideology, the ideology of freedom, of free enterprise. Non-figurative and politically silent it was the very antithesis of socialist realism" (254). They viewed AE as the true expression of the national will. To bypass right-wing criticism, the CIA turned to the private sector (namely MOMA and its co-founder, Nelson Rockefeller, who referred to AE as "free enterprise painting.") Many directors at MOMA had longstanding links to the CIA and were more than willing to lend a hand in promoting AE as a weapon in the cultural Cold War. Heavily funded exhibits of AE were organized all over Europe; art critics were mobilized, and art magazines churned out articles full of lavish praise. The combined economic resources of MOMA and the CIA-run Fairfield Foundation ensured the collaboration of Europe's most prestigious galleries which, in turn, were able to influence aesthetics across Europe.

AE as "free art" ideology (George Kennan, 272) was used to attack politically committed artists in Europe. The Congress for Cultural Freedom (the CIA front) threw its weight behind abstract painting, over representational or realist aesthetics, in an explicit political act. Commenting on the political role of AE, Saunders points out: "One of the extraordinary features of the role that American painting played in the cultural Cold War is not the fact that it became part of the enterprise, but that a movement which so deliberately declared itself to be apolitical could become so intensely politicized" (275). The CIA associated apolitical artists and art with freedom. This was directed toward neutralizing the artists on the European left. The irony, of course, was that the apolitical posturing was only for left-wing consumption.

Nevertheless, the CIA and its cultural organizations were able to profoundly shape the postwar view of art. Many prestigious writers, poets, artists, and musicians proclaimed their independence from politics and declared their belief in art for art's sake. The dogma of the free artist or intellectual, as someone disconnected from political engagement, gained ascendancy and is pervasive to this day.

While Saunders has presented a superbly detailed account of the links between the CIA and Western artists and intellectuals, she leaves unexplored the structural reasons for the necessity of CIA deception and control over dissent. Her discussion is framed largely in the context of political competition and conflict with Soviet communism. There is no serious attempt to locate the CIA's cultural Cold War in the context of class warfare, indigenous third world revolutions, and independent Marxist challenges to U.S. imperialist economic domination. This leads Saunders to selectively praise some CIA ventures at the expense of others, some operatives over others. Rather than see the CIA's cultural war as part of an imperialist system, Saunders tends to be critical of its deceptive and distinct reactive nature. The U.S.-NATO cultural conquest of Eastern Europe and the ex-USSR should quickly dispel

any notion that the cultural war was a defensive action.

The very origins of the cultural Cold War were rooted in class warfare. Early on, the CIA and its U.S. AFL-CIO operatives Irving Brown and Jay Lovestone (ex-communists) poured millions of dollars into subverting militant trade unions and breaking strikes through the funding of social democratic unions (94). The Congress for Cultural Freedom and its enlightened intellectuals were funded by the same CIA operatives who hired Marseilles gangsters to break the dockworkers' strikes in 1948.

After the Second World War, with the discrediting in Western Europe of the old right (compromised by its links to the fascists and a weak capitalist system), the CIA realized that, in order to undermine the anti-NATO trade unionists and intellectuals, it needed to find (or invent) a Democratic Left to engage in ideological warfare. A special sector of the CIA was set up to circumvent right-wing Congressional objections. The Democratic Left was essentially used to combat the radical left and to provide an ideological gloss on U.S. hegemony in Europe. At no point were the ideological pugilists of the democratic left in any position to shape the strategic policies and interests of the United States. Their job was not to question or demand, but to serve the empire in the name of "Western democratic values." Only when massive opposition to the Vietnam War surfaced in the United States and Europe, and their CIA covers were blown, did many of the CIA-promoted and -financed intellectuals jump ship and begin to criticize U.S. foreign policy. For example, after spending most of his career on the CIA payroll, Stephen Spender became a critic of U.S. Vietnam policy, as did some of the editors of *Partisan Review*. They all claimed innocence, but few critics believed that a love affair with so many journals and convention junkets, so long and deeply involved, could transpire without some degree of knowledge.

The CIA's involvement in the cultural life of the United States, Europe, and elsewhere had important long-term consequences. Many intellectuals were rewarded with prestige, public recognition, and research funds precisely for operating within the ideological blinders set by the Agency. Some of the biggest names in philosophy, political ethics, sociology, and art, who gained visibility from CIA-funded conferences and journals, went on to establish the norms and standards for promotion of the new generation, based on the political parameters established by the CIA. Not merit nor skill, but politics -- the Washington line -- defined "truth" and "excellence" and future chairs in prestigious academic settings, foundations, and museums.

The U.S. and European Democratic Left's anti-Stalinist rhetorical ejaculations, and their proclamations of faith in democratic values and freedom, were a useful ideological cover for the heinous crimes of the West. Once again, in NATO's recent war against Yugoslavia, many Democratic Left intellectuals have lined up with the West and the KLA in its bloody purge of tens of thousands of Serbs and the murder of scores of innocent civilians. If anti-Stalinism was the opium of the Democratic Left during the Cold War, human rights interventionism has the same narcotizing effect today, and deludes contemporary Democratic Leftists.

The CIA's cultural campaigns created the prototype for today's seemingly apolitical intellectuals, academics, and artists who are divorced from popular struggles and whose worth rises with their distance from the working classes and their proximity to prestigious

foundations. The CIA role model of the successful professional is the ideological gatekeeper, excluding critical intellectuals who write about class struggle, class exploitation and U.S. imperialism -- "ideological" not "objective" categories, or so they are told.

The singular lasting, damaging influence of the CIA's Congress of Cultural Freedom crowd was not their specific defenses of U.S. imperialist policies, but their success in imposing on subsequent generations of intellectuals the idea of excluding any sustained discussion of U.S. imperialism from the influential cultural and political media. The issue is not that today's intellectuals or artists may or may not take a progressive position on this or that issue. The problem is the pervasive belief among writers and artists that anti-imperialist social and political expressions should not appear in their music, paintings, and serious writing if they want their work to be considered of substantial artistic merit. The enduring political victory of the CIA was to convince intellectuals that serious and sustained political engagement on the left is incompatible with serious art and scholarship. Today at the opera, theater, and art galleries, as well as in the professional meetings of academics, the Cold War values of the CIA are visible and pervasive: who dares to undress the emperor?

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- *Cultivating revolution; the United States and agrarian reform in Latin America* (Random House, 1971)
- *Politics and Social Forces in Chilean Development* (University of California Press, 1969).

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