The Historical Journal, 54, 3 (2011), pp. 925–932 © Cambridge University Press 2011
doi:10.1017/S0018246X11000306

HOW FRONT ORGANIZATIONS PLAYED THE CIA

The mighty Wurlitzer: how the CIA played America. By Hugh Wilford. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008. Pp. 342. ISBN 0674026810. $27.95.

Legacy of ashes: the history of the CIA. By Tim Weiner. London: Allen Lane, 2007. Pp. 720. ISBN 1846140463. £25.00.

Satchmo blows up the world: jazz ambassadors play the Cold War. By Penny von Eschen. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. Pp. 352. ISBN 0674022602. $18.95 (pb).

Who paid the piper? The CIA and the cultural Cold War. By Frances Stonor Saunders. London: Granta, 2000. Pp. 544. ISBN 1862070296. £9.99 (pb).

Russia lost the Cold War because its economy resembled a Potemkin village, the dictatorship of the proletariat necessitated cruel repression, and nationalism was never extinguished across the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. But the conflict with the United States was not entirely one-sided. For much of its existence the Soviet Union outperformed its wealthier adversary in the fields of intelligence, espionage, the cultivation and retention of foreign agents, and the establishment of 'front' organizations: the dark arts of international relations. When in August 1935 the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International endorsed a worldwide 'People's Front' against fascism – designed to unite socialists of all stripes against a malevolent adversary – Stalin's Politburo stumbled upon an effective subterfuge through which to win converts to the humane world-system promised by Marx and Engels. Progressive Americans, for the most part unaware of Moscow's hidden hand, flocked to various branches of this Popular Front, as it became known, in commensurate step with the rise of Nazi Germany and the worsening of the Great Depression – a hammer blow to capitalism's credibility as a system beneficial to all strata of society.

Through the 1930s, five million desperate workers, frustrated by the consensual 'business unionism' of the American Federation of Labour, joined the more radical, communist-infiltrated Congress of Industrial Organization.[1] As it became clear that FDR's New Deal had its colour limits, and impressed by communists' sympathy for their plight in the segregated South, African-Americans joined the militant National Negro Congress in their tens of

[1] On the CIO's burgeoning popularity in this period see Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1995); and Howard Kimeldorf, *Reds or rackets: The making of radical and conservative unions on the waterfront* (Berkeley, CA, 1988).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X11000306 Published online by Cambridge University Press

thousands. Offering steadfast support to trade unionists, political dissidents, and black defendants facing racist judges and juries, the International Labour Defense fought valiantly against lynching and labour repression, publicizing and reversing some grievous miscarriages of justice. Given sustenance – and guidance not always heeded – by Stalin's Soviet Union, front organizations such as these proliferated and thrived in interwar America. Their success was such that a *Fortune* poll in 1942 found that 25 per cent of US citizens 'favoured' socialism and another 35 per cent had an open mind about its merits.[2] The 1930s was a golden age for the American left; a time of pervasive Soviet ideological penetration.[3] Or so it seemed, at least, to the aspiring spooks that formed the CIA in 1947.

Frank Wisner, the Agency's first ever chief of political warfare, was awed by the Communist International's success in both establishing and infiltrating influential fronts that possessed the outward appearance of independence, but that were in fact guided by a partisan agenda set by Moscow. He accepted that penetrating the Soviet Union in the same fashion was impossible, but believed that the West required much more than the US government's shining example to guide them to achieve affluence and societal harmony. Wisner concluded that this newly formed intelligence organization needed to manipulate front organizations in the United States and beyond to surpass the Soviet Union's efforts in that field. He believed that this network of ostensibly disparate fronts – across the arts, media, student organizations, and organized labour – might be fashioned to resemble a mighty Wurlitzer organ, capable of playing any propaganda tune the CIA so desired.

It is Wisner's musical metaphor – suggesting hubris of the highest order – that provides Hugh Wilford with an arresting title for his impeccably researched book tracing the rise and fall of the CIA-funded front organization. From the Congress for Cultural Freedom to the American Society for African Culture, Wilford examines the varied ways in which the CIA 'played' the United States, and identifies three broad stages of operation. The first front organizations were designed to provide a cover for émigrés and refugees from communist bloc countries 'who were viewed as a potential secret army capable of infiltrating and undermining the Soviet Empire from within'. The second wave of activity was devised with a view to shoring up 'civil society in Western Europe against communist destabilization, most of which mobilized groups on the so- called non-communist left: trade unionist, intellectuals and students'. Finally, as the parameters of the Cold War expanded beyond industrialized Europe and Japan, the CIA focused on recruiting minority groups such as 'women and African

[2] Polling data cited in Michael Denning, *The cultural front: the labouring of American culture in the twentieth century* (London, 1996), p. 67.

[3] On American communism, see Harvey Klehr, John Early Haynes, and Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov, *The secret world of American communism* (New Haven, CT, 1995); and Harvery Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson, *The Soviet world of American communism* (New Haven, CT, 1998).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X11000306 Published online by Cambridge University Press

writers' to aid the free world's cause of combating Marxist-Leninist influence in nations recently released from European colonialism (pp. 7–8).

Wilford acknowledges that he is not surveying virgin territory.[4] Frances Stonor Saunder's influential book, *Who paid the piper? The CIA and the cultural Cold War* asserted that the CIA provided critical financial sustenance to cultural, artistic, and philanthropic organizations – orchestrated by their ambitious, anticommunist ring-masters, Arthur Koestler, Tom Brady, Nicholas Nabokov, and Michael Josselsen – and in doing so called their tune. In striving to support an identifiably American artistic riposte to one-dimensional socialist realism, Saunders contends that the CIA privileged high and abstract art over other forms, and critically compromised the integrity of all who became involved. Posing the question of whether any government should 'covertly intervene in the fundamental processes of organic intellectual growth', Saunders answers that '*ur*-freedom' is invariably the result: a situation where 'people think they are acting freely, when in fact they are bound to forces over which they have no control' (p. 5). The author's distaste for the CIA is strikingly expressed in the conclusion:

> the same people who read Dante and went to Yale and were educated in civic virtue recruited Nazis, manipulated the outcome of democratic elections, gave LSD to unwitting citizens, opened the mail of thousands of American citizens, overthrew government, supported dictatorships, plotted assassinations, and engineered the Bay of Pigs disaster. 'In the name of what?' asked one critic. 'Not civic virtue, but empire.'
>
> (p. 427)

Narrower in focus, and less sensational in conclusion, Penny von Eschen's *Satchmo blows up the world: jazz ambassadors play the Cold War* examines how prominent jazz musicians were courted by the US government and persuaded to tour the Soviet Union, playing a musical form that encapsulated the best of the United States: cosmopolitan, modern, and driven by free expression. Unlike Saunders, Eschen has no doubt that the colourful subjects of her artistic focus – including luminaries such as Louis Armstrong, Dizzie Gillespie, Duke Ellington, and Dave Brubeck – were vigorously independent in their judgements, whether their tours were financed by the government or not. An entertaining and scholarly examination of the cultural and the geopolitical, Von Eschen's book is a model example of how to expand the boundaries of Cold War history.

[4] Other books that explore CIA fronts include Eric Thomas Chester, *Covert network: progressives, the International Rescue Committee, and the CIA* (New York, NY, 1995); Peter Grose, *Operation rollback: America's secret war behind the Iron Curtain* (Boston, MA, 2000); Joel Kotek, *Students and the Cold War* (Basingstoke, 1996); Helen Laville, *Cold War women: the international activities of American women's organizations* (Manchester, 2002); W. Scott Lucas, *Freedom's war: the U.S. crusade against the Soviet Union, 1945–1956* (Manchester, 1996); and Robin Winks, *Cloak and gown: scholars in the secret war, 1939–1961* (2nd edn, New Haven, CT, 1996).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X11000306 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Wilford tends towards Von Eschen's measured style, highlighting numerous occasions where the designated 'front' organization was more belligerent than the CIA itself. This was certainly true in the case of the National Committee for a Free Europe (NCFE), founded in May 1949 by public sponsors that included Dwight D. Eisenhower, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, and Cecil DeMille – and surreptitiously funded by abundant CIA largesse: $18 million in 1951 alone (p. 32). The NCFE offered research support to individual émigrés, recently arrived from the Eastern bloc, on projects examining Soviet methods of control in the satellite states. The organization established a publishing house, the Free Europe Press, and created its very own university, the Free Europe University in Exile, accommodated in a grand château near Strasbourg. These programmes afforded the émigrés a comfortable, well-resourced environment in which to critique Moscow in the pages of scholarly journals and newspapers.

In 1950, Radio Free Europe was established to allow anti-communist émigrés a more potent outlet to express themselves – a direct line to their captive nations – providing inspiration and intellectual sustenance to dissidents such as Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel, who both later testified to its potency as a symbol of liberty. Yet for all of Radio Free Europe's virtues, it also played a part in creating the tragic Hungarian uprising of 1956, where émigré commentators deployed, as the CIA described it, a tone that 'was more exuberant and optimistic than the situation warranted', suggesting that the timing was propitious for revolution – implying that the United States was on board (p. 49). When a Soviet counteroffensive killed thousands of Hungarian demonstrators, leading to the capture and execution of Imre Nagy, the socialist moderate who spearheaded the movement, the Eisenhower administration could do little but protest through the usual channels, exposing anti-communist 'rollback' as a sham, and front activity in this instance as fatally flawed. Frank Wisner, in Hungary at the time of the rebellion, pleaded with Washington to authorize military action beyond the Iron Curtain. Rebuffed by his political masters – who were concerned that such actions would precipitate a third world war – and consumed by guilt at the damage wreaked by this particular front, Wisner left the CIA in 1962 and committed suicide in 1965. Given a powerful outlet through which to champion the message of liberation, the émigrés ignored the CIA's instructions to employ a moderate tone. This front could not be controlled because the émigrés' purpose was to liberate their homeland, not to irritate the KGB or simply give the Soviet Union a bloody nose.

Sidney Hook and James Burnham – two 'New York intellectuals' and fierce anti-communists – were the most influential figures in establishing the front that has attracted the most attention from historians: the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF). Sidney Hook was, according to Wilford, 'the archetypal Jewish New York intellectual: brilliant, pugnacious, a fearsome polemicist'. Burnham, another New York University professor, was 'taller in stature, gentler in expression, more elegant in appearance [belonging] to the small number of native-stock patrician rebels who were also members of the group' (pp. 73–4).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X11000306 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Both believed that their earlier adherence to Trotskyism gave them an edge over workaday political moderates when it came to appraising the threats posed by Stalin's Soviet Union. As Burnham wrote to Hook in December 1948, the CIA 'do not know how to implement their knowledge and willingness. We ought to be able to find some way to help them – and ourselves – there.' A later advocate of rolling back communism, as expressed in his critique of George Kennan's geopolitical defeatism, *Containment or liberation?*, Burnham's motivation for assisting the CIA in their cultural battle against communism was not just to advise official opinion – 'he was actively trying to shape it' (p. 77).[5] Hook was similarly certain that the US government would do well to heed his insights. In September 1948, after spending a week in Germany consulting with General Lucius D. Clay and others in the American occupation force, Hook informed Burnham immodestly that his hosts 'have accepted my diagnosis of the situation in Europe' (p. 78).

Burnham and Hook both believed that the CCF, formed in West Berlin in June 1950 – as close to the enemy as one could get – should engage in Popular Front-style rallies in Western Europe and engage in destabilizing propaganda activities to the East. The Hungarian-born polymath Arthur Koestler was even more determined that the purpose of a cultural front was to foment rebellion, not simply to convince intellectual neutrals that the West possessed cultural merits that transcended shallow materialism. The CIA, however, feared the consequence of such direct confrontation and instead adopted a 'soft cell' strategy, 'winning intellectuals to the western cause in the Cold War by fostering a sense of cultural community between America and Europe' (pp. 80–1). The Agency, unsurprisingly, had its way, and the CCF concerned itself with cultural diplomacy rather than political warfare. Burnham, Hook, and Koestler were disappointed by the CIA's timidity, and each in time fell to the margins.

Jason Epstein, co-founder of the *New York Review of Books*, recalled that when the CCF arrived on the scene in the 1950s, struggling writers were astonished to find that 'suddenly there were limousines, parties with lashings of smoked salmon, and so on' (pp. 102–3). The Congress became a major patron of the arts, ploughing resources into lavish literary festivals, offering generous travel grants to the likes of Mary McCarthy, Dwight McDonald, and Robert Lowell, and channelling funding to well-regarded literary journals such as *Partisan Review* and *Encounter*. But all too often this money did not reach its intended recipient, instead being used for purposes removed from Cold War exigency. A bankers draft of $1,000 sent to a CCF affiliate in India simply disappeared – Burnham suspected that an entrepreneurial Indian editor quietly pocketed it for the purpose of promoting his magazine. The editor of *Encounter*, Stephen Spender, was clear in his own mind that the CIA funding came with few binding strings attached and that 'he tried constantly to reduce

[5] James Burnham, *Containment or liberation? An inquiry into the aims of United States foreign policy* (New York, NY, 1956).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X11000306 Published online by Cambridge University Press

American influence over the magazine and turn it into a vehicle for Bloomsbury literati such as himself' (p. 115). British intellectuals would lunch in well-regarded Soho restaurants and toast the US taxpayer for footing the bill. In an episode that encapsulates the pitfalls of attempting to manage intellectuals, the poet Robert Lowell, during a CCF-funded tour of Latin America, discarded his antidepressants, liberated himself from his clothing, and mounted an equestrian statue in the centre of Buenos Aires. He pronounced himself to be 'Caesar of Argentina' and identified his nonplussed CCF minder as a loyal general (p. 113).

The dilemma with lavishing CIA funding on Western culture is an obvious one, and Wilford states it clearly:

> The whole point of American art was supposed to be that it was free, the unfettered expression of individual consciousness: this is what distinguished it from agitprop produced by the Soviet Union's 'artists in uniform'. How, then, could the U.S. government openly mobilize American culture in the Cold War *kuturkampf*?
> (p. 101)

The answer was that the Agency could not do so openly, and was largely ineffective when it did so clandestinely. As leaders of a totalitarian society, Stalin and Khrushchev could crack the whip when its cultural and intellectual icons stepped out of line. Shostakovich was an exception, producing work under some duress that possessed sufficient independent-mindedness to provoke two official denunciations. But his dissidence was so subtle as to lead some to question its existence.[6] The CIA could exert little leverage over the individuals it chose to fund. And because the people and organizations most useful to the Agency were primarily located on the left, they were compelled to deal with some tricky customers.

The American Society for African Culture (AMSAC) came into existence in June 1957 with a view to 'spread understanding of the validity of African and Negro cultural contributions to provide a basis for mutual respect between Americans and Africans' (p. 209). As far as the CIA was concerned, its main purpose was to convince Africans that the United States was not the violently racist society that communists portrayed – a vexing task in the still-segregated 1950s. James Farmer, a civil rights pioneer who helped organize the 1961 Freedom Rides, was a respected black activist who visited Africa under AMSAC auspices to counter Malcolm X's radical separatist agenda, which he described as tantamount to 'apartheid … and worse'. Nonetheless, Farmer harshly criticized US policy toward South Africa, the Portuguese colonies, and the Congo. In ostensibly pro-American lectures in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Nigeria, Farmer described sharing a US transport plane with a

[6] On the relationship between Shostakovich and Stalin see Solomon Volkov, *Shostakovich and Stalin: the extraordinary relationship between the great composer and the brutal dictator* (New York, NY, 2004), and Laurel Fay, *Shostakovich: a life* (New York, NY, 2000).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X11000306 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'sleazy bunch' of white mercenaries, 'every one with a pistol on his hip', who were sanctioned to carry out their 'nigger-killing' campaigns only because of the 'support we gave them' (p. 218). When Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965, Farmer claimed sensationally that he was killed by Harlem drug racketeers in league with the CIA. While publicly impugning the KGB in the Soviet Union would have undoubtedly meant the gulag, James Farmer ran for Congress as a Republican in 1968 and was awarded the presidential Medal of Freedom in 1998. The CIA might have cast covetous glances at the brutal range of options enjoyed by its Soviet counterpart, but it simply could not direct the fronts, baton in hand, as Wisner had envisaged.

Reviewing *The mighty Wurlitzer* in the *New York Times Book Review*, Harvard sociologist Nathan Glazer celebrated the 'bravery' of those, such as feminist icon Gloria Steinem, who were willing to ally themselves with the CIA to combat a totalitarian enemy; that patriotism and intellectual integrity can cohabit without dissonance.[7] Glazer is correct to suggest that the fronts were often populated by those with clear and noble convictions. Steinem volunteered to serve in the CIA-backed United States National Student Association to disrupt a Soviet-financed student youth festival in Vienna in 1959. She led a delegation that included future national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, and their efforts were designed to spread discord between the Soviet Union and its allies. The Polish-born Brzezinski walked openly amongst the Russians, saying with a heavy Polish accent 'Out of my way Russian pig.' For Steinem, these none-too-subtle larks were born of noble intentions. Vienna was her 'small world equivalent of going off to join the Spanish Revolution'. When *Ramparts* magazine publicized the existence of the CIA fronts in 1967 – provoking outrage across America and the world – Steinem was proud of her alliance with the Agency, declaring that 'it was completely different from its image; it was liberal, non-violent, and honourable' (pp. 146–7).

What we now know about the CIA dispels Steinem's rose-tinted appraisal – although in a governmental landscape ravaged by McCarthyism, the Agency was indeed about as liberal as it got in the late 1950s. Tim Weiner's published history of the CIA, *Legacy of ashes* makes a strong case that the Agency was simplistic, alarmist, and even sanguine at times, in appraising Soviet threats. When problem nations were identified, the CIA was then both cack-handed and callous in its attempts to depose leaders allegedly susceptible to Moscow's charms. Weiner's conclusion is sobering: 'For sixty years tens of thousands of clandestine service officers have gathered only the barest threads of truly important intelligence – and that is the CIA's deepest secret' (p. 514). Wilford's book is valuable because its even-handed scholarship joins Weiner in undermining the reputation for all-knowing, ruthless efficiency that boosters of the Agency might want us to believe. The CIA fronts were not necessarily driven by those possessed of reflexive, unedifying anti-communist urges. Its patronage of

[7] Nathan Glazer, 'A word from our sponsor', *New York Times Book Review*, 20 Jan. 2008.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X11000306 Published online by Cambridge University Press

high modernism is a colourful tale – compellingly, if excitedly, told by Saunders in *Who paid the piper?* – but it scarcely reduces the fruits of that movement to compromised government agitprop. What is striking is just how inept the CIA often was when it came to identifying and managing its allies in propaganda. Wilford's achievement is to make this so clear.

The precise impact of these front organizations on the course of the Cold War is difficult to establish. But it is hard to dispute Wilford's conclusion that in today's international climate 'the winning of hearts and minds, should be left to overt government agencies and genuine, nongovernment organizations' (p. 254). One individual that emerges from the book with great credit is playwright Arthur Miller, who received simultaneous invitations from the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, the American Committee for Liberation, and the Union of Soviet Writers to offer reflections on the seventy-fifth anniversary of Fyodor Dostoevsky's death. Miller responded:

> The facts, I believe, make it absolutely impossible for either the American or Soviet civilizations to honestly 'claim Dostoevsky' and unless I am altogether mistaken all these celebrations are designed with that aim. Were he alive today I believe he would be in trouble in America for certain of his views, and in Russia for others.
>
> (p. 94)

In refusing both offers Miller displayed an independent-mindedness that would have been unacceptable in the Soviet Union. His refusal to tie his flag to a superpower mast constituted a truer testimony to the West's virtues than any number of CIA-funded fronts.

UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA DAVID MILNE

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X11000306 Published online by Cambridge University Press