

Cold Warriors: Writers Who Waged the Literary Cold War

Duncan White (Custom House/HarperCollins Publishers, 2019), 782 pp., plates, illustrations, bibliographic references, index

Reviewed by Leslie C.

The Russian poet Osip Mandelstam once observed, “If they’re killing people for poetry that means they honor and esteem it, they fear it . . . that means poetry is power.” This is Duncan White’s theme in *Cold Warriors: Writers Who Waged the Literary Cold War*, in which he offers a “group biography” of literary figures across the ideological divide through six decades of competition between communism and liberalism. Of greater relevance here, however, is the book’s service as an imperfect history of a type of covert action, wherein East and West used writers as weapons in a sprawling influence campaign.

The United States and the Soviet Union both sponsored writers, openly and clandestinely. In the latter effort, the CIA, working through fronts, underwrote literary magazines and publishers, funded conventions and prizes, and smuggled banned literature behind the Iron Curtain—most famously, Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*. Because of their liberal educations, operators like CIA’s David Wisner recognized—in ways the doctrinaire Soviets never could—that “literature that did not look like propaganda was much more effective at winning hearts and minds than polemical material.” (435) The Soviets, working through the Comintern and later directly through their security services, organized “gatherings of sympathetic intellectuals . . . in the hope that these intellectuals would help sway public opinion in their own countries.” (77–78) Literature seems to be one field in which the Soviets were handicapped. Most writers are jealous of their independence regardless of their politics, and White’s narrative offers a look into how a generation of leftists turned on Moscow.

In the struggle between clandestine services, those of open societies are disadvantaged; Soviet communism was, of course, the product of a conspiracy. The West, with time, did turn the party’s paranoia and its orthodox zeal against it, and writers could be sharp edges in this effort, though often unwitting of their role. If some felt betrayed when the hidden hand of the intelligence community became evident, they might have taken some

comfort from the unexpected fact that “the U.S. government and its various agencies ended up as champions of the experimental literature of the early twentieth century’s avant garde.” (99)

The book rightly treats the Spanish Civil War as a Cold War ideological antecedent. A conflict against fascism was a magnet for leftists, including such novelists as George Orwell, Arthur Koestler, and Ernest Hemingway, and the poets W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender. Orwell, wounded in combat, later wrote that it became “difficult to think about this war in the same naively idealistic manner as before” (33); while Spender, who “had entered the Spanish War a Communist, striding toward a socialist future . . . began shuffling backward to liberalism.” (54) Why this change of heart? The savagery of civil war with its atrocities and assassinations, coupled with a heavy-handed Soviet intelligence apparatus more concerned with enforcing the party line than with fighting fascism, alienated many. The purges and show trials of the late 1930s, and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact on the eve of World War II, further poisoned the well.

Along this path of disillusion we learn the success of Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* convinced Orwell that “fiction, rather than journalism or memoir, however scrupulous, was the most effective way to communicate the essence of totalitarianism.” (94) Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*, now regarded as a classic, was neither critically well-received nor commercially successful upon publication. *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were cut from different cloth and made Orwell the uncomfortable avatar of an anticommunist liberalism that realized “imaginative fiction was a weapon that provoked disproportionate fear in totalitarian governments.” (238)

Similarly disillusioned, though for different reasons, were British intelligence officers turned writers whose experiences in World War II and the early Cold War turned them to satire and dark criticism. Graham Greene was struck by the “absurdity” of “agents selling fictional information to credulous spy services.” which became

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the foundation for his 1958 novel *Our Man In Havana*. (173) Likewise, David Cornwell—better known by his nom de plume, John Le Carré—shaped the popular view of intelligence as a syllabus of “failed missions, incompetent agents, grubby compromises, and hollow sacrifices.” (683) Ironic, because as White writes, “Cornwell’s ongoing use of a pseudonym and the seeming precision of the technical language of espionage gave [his work] a sense of authenticity. This frustrated Cornwell, who knew he would not have gotten the book past SIS had it disclosed anything resembling real operations.” (488) The duplicity and betrayal of the Cambridge Five hardened in Cornwell, and others, the fear of a West unable to compete in the shadow world. Strange, because in hindsight it appears evident that the Berlin Wall, coupled with Soviet suppression of writers, indicated early a sort of desperation in Moscow.

White is an effective and generally engaging writer, but he is on surer ground earlier in the book. As his narrative progresses into the 1960s and beyond, however, it becomes uneven and at times almost slapdash. Some of his choices are odd, such as his inclusion of a treatment of Harold “Kim” Philby, which he justifies—after admitting that Philby was not a literary figure—with the claim that his story demonstrates “the way espionage and literature become so fascinatingly intertwined. . . . Philby did not write fiction, he lived it.” (12) At least CIA counterintelligence official James Angleton, who is also described, had literary bona fides, having dabbled in poetry and edited a modernist journal while at Yale. Likewise the profiles of Mary McCarthy, who became a credulous tool for communist propagandists when she toured Hanoi at the height of the Vietnam War, or the Sandinista poet Gianconda Belli, who ultimately fled to the more congenial environment of Western Europe, pale before the examples of leftists, who, in Orwell’s view, exposed the Soviet myth because they wanted to preserve socialism.

White also has a tendency to moral equivalencies, as when he draws a parallel between the Sinyavsky-Daniel show trial and the revelation of CIA funding of liberal journals, and to unintended irony, as when he describes a November 1966 “tribunal” convened by Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre to “investigate American war crimes

in Vietnam,” when Sartre was an apologist for Soviet excesses long after he might have known better. Similarly irritating is the reversion to cliché, as when White suggests life imitated art when Edward Lansdale emerged in Southeast Asia as a “real-life [Alden] Pyle” (374); or when he pushes the dubious yet popular notion that President Kennedy would not have committed America to war in Vietnam based solely on his “better understanding of the complexity of the situation” derived from visiting Saigon in the 1950s as a congressman. (547)

Present also are easily avoided factual errors, such as attributing the Kent State shootings to the police when it was nervous National Guardsmen, or identifying William Calley as a platoon commander when he was a company commander. A reader might ask why this is relevant in a book about the literary Cold War; it is a fair question, and indicative of how in doing too much White loses focus.

Because the book is for a general audience it might be beside the point to note that it is based almost entirely on secondary sources, and some of these are, to be generous, problematic. For example, White’s treatment of the Office of Policy Coordination’s support for the Congress of Cultural Freedom draws heavily from Tim Weiner’s discredited *Legacy of Ashes*. This subject has been better treated, and with more rigor, elsewhere.

I am reminded of a salty instructor in my basic trade-craft course who deftly handled a student’s question about moral equivalence between “us” and “them” (e.g., “We recruit spies. They recruit spies. What’s the difference?” with the laconic reply, “We do it in defense of liberal democracy. They do it in defense of a monstrous tyranny.”) Likewise there is a clear distinction between how Western intelligence services and their Soviet adversaries conducted this type of covert action. As White shows in the book’s stronger sections, Moscow clumsily subsidized fellow travelers, made martyrs out of writers like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and alienated the most talented authors who initially supported the Soviet experiment. Though CIA’s covert sponsorship of writers was ultimately exposed with the inevitable backlash, it would be disingenuous to argue the efforts were morally equivalent. The CIA, after all, sought influence and not control.



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