

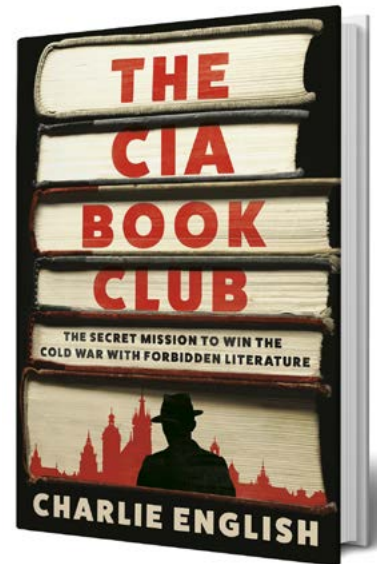
# intelligence in public media

## *The CIA Book Club*

### *The Secret Mission to Win the Cold War with Forbidden Literature*

Reviewed by Dr. David Robarge

**Author:** Charlie English  
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**Print Pages** 341 pages, index  
**Reviewer:** The reviewer is CIA's chief historian.



CIA's secret program to send books to Soviet Bloc countries during the Cold War was one of the longest-running covert action operations in its history. Lasting from July 1956 to September 1991, the Book Program was responsible for delivering as many as 10 million volumes of dissident and Western literature to readers behind the Iron Curtain. The program started somewhat ineffectually, with early, stumbling efforts to distribute leaflets and letters denigrating communism and touting Western achievements by balloon and scattershot mailings as well as reliance on a mélange of fractious émigré groups for propaganda written in the West. It became more sophisticated over time, working through specialized CIA front companies and established commercial publishing houses in the United States and Europe to print certain works or, more often, to supply and distribute copies of existing books that Soviet Bloc governments did not want their citizens to read.

Charlie English, formerly a literary editor at the *Guardian*, has crafted a well-written chronicle of the Book Program and its impact principally in one country—

Poland. But that creates the book's main shortcoming: a disjointed and uneven narrative that focuses largely on the antiregime movement in Poland that developed into the Solidarity trade union movement and brought down the regime starting in 1989. Members of that resistance were important in clandestinely distributing Book Program materials into their country, often in ingenious ways, but much of what they did—which English details (often very dramatically) based largely on interviews with former underground members—was conducted under the auspices of CIA's covert action campaign or independently from it and not under the Book Program itself. The two operations were complementary but distinct, and English's sometimes gripping accounts of the resistance's furtive activities and the Polish government's often brutal repression frequently overwhelms the storytelling. The Book Program fades into the background or vanishes entirely for long stretches.

When English concentrates on “the CIA's Book Club,” he does a creditable job of describing the important personalities and mechanisms by which so much literature

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got distributed to so many eager readers in the Soviet Bloc. US policymakers had pressed CIA to conduct influence activities similar to the Book Program since the agency was created in 1947, but not until Josef Stalin's death in 1953 were restrictions on intellectual life in Iron Curtain countries relaxed sufficiently for such operations to have any effect. To take optimal advantage of those changes and avoid prompting retaliatory repression, the Book Program's managers insisted from the start that it be an instrument of peaceful change and not a catalyst for political uprisings.

CIA's effort to publish Boris Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago* began a series of relationships with publishers and distributors in the United States and Europe that included cooperative non-émigré and émigré companies but also involved creation of new proprietaries to help ensure control over content.<sup>a</sup> Distribution channels included bookstores and book fairs, youth festivals, conferences, international sports competitions, special mailings to UN delegates, donations to overseas libraries, educational institutions, clubs, cultural associations, and churches, and smugglers' networks. Person-to-person distribution through travelers, mariners, and long-haul truckers was always a key clandestine part of the program to elude postal censorship, especially for overtly political books. Some of those methods were especially important in Poland for bringing in CIA-supplied equipment and supplies that the underground used to disseminate its messages—another example of the complementarity of the two covert operations.

As the Book Program grew, it caused Soviet Bloc authorities to devote more postal, customs, and security resources to censoring mail, monitoring cross-border movements, and surveilling anti-regime elements. Beyond forcing those additional (and ultimately wasteful) diversions of money and manpower, the interception or discovery of even a small amount of banned or controlled Western, émigré, or dissident literature left communist officials with the disturbing

thought that they had only found the surface of a much deeper reservoir of subversive sentiment—hence the “shark fin” and “iceberg” metaphors sometimes used during these kinds of operations.

English clearly tries to indicate that, along with the courage, daring, and resilience of the Polish resistance, the Book Program had a significant impact in destabilizing the regime. Better open-source assessments of the operation, however, come from people who were personally involved with it, such as John Matthews and Alfred Reisch—especially Reisch, who has written the most comprehensive study of the Book Program.<sup>b</sup> In addition to citing the number of books distributed over the years, they make a compelling case with data on thousands of responses to mailings and requests for additional titles and with written testimonials from recipients of the books. Other data of the program's resonance are the increasing frequency with which distributed books were reviewed or cited in other works and communist regimes' extensive efforts to interdict book shipments

The democratization of Poland after the parliamentary elections in 1989 was the first step in the demise of the Soviet empire, but even before then, Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* (relaxation of intellectual and cultural controls) was mooting the underlying premise of the Book Program. Covert distribution of “non-conformist” literature soon became unnecessary, and after the Soviet Union was disestablished in 1991, President George H.W. Bush canceled the Finding authorizing the publication and infiltration of literature into the Soviet Bloc. English quickly describes the denouement of the Book Program, but his preoccupation with events in Poland, many of them not directly connected to “CIA's Book Club,” limits the value of his examination of one of CIA's most underrecognized achievements. The Book Program still awaits a chronicle that combines English's personalized storytelling with Reisch's thorough academic-style research. ■

a. Detailed in Peter Finn and Petra Couvée, *The Zhivago Affair: The Kremlin, the CIA, and the Battle Over a Forbidden Book* (Pantheon Books, 2014).

b. John P.C. Matthews, “The West's Secret Marshall Plan for the Mind,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 16, no. 3, 409–27; Alfred A. Reisch, *Hot Books in the Cold War: The CIA-Funded Secret Western Book Distribution Program Behind the Iron Curtain* (Central European Press, 2013).