

The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

By Frances Stonor Saunders. New York: The New Press, 2000. 509 pages.

Reviewed by Thomas M. Troy, Jr.

If *The Cultural Cold War* had been published in the 1960s or 1970s, it most likely would have caused a sensation and been a best seller. It would have provoked anguished editorials in major Western newspapers and a barrage of “we-told-you-so” items in the communist-controlled media. Published at the turn of the century, however, the book is something of a curiosity.¹ It contains a long cry of moral outrage over the fact that the CIA committed “vast resources to a secret program of cultural propaganda in western Europe.”² At the same time, the author, an independent filmmaker and novelist, has produced a well-written account of a basically unfamiliar story with a cast of many larger-than-life characters who played roles in the Cold War.

To over-simplify the historical background: In the late 1940s, Washington did not take it for granted that the people in Western Europe would support democratic governments and that their states would effectively

oppose the Soviet Union and support the United States. To help promote democracy and to oppose the Soviet Union and West European communist parties, the CIA supported members of the non-communist left, including many intellectuals. Because the CIA's activities were clandestine, only a few of the beneficiaries were witting of the Agency's support, although a large number suspected Agency involvement.

Frances Saunders evidently was dismayed and shocked! shocked! to learn there was gambling in the back room of Rick's café. She finds the Agency's activities to be reprehensible and morally repugnant and believes that the CIA's "deception" actually undermined intellectual freedom. She rejects the "blank check" line of defense offered by some people that the Agency "simply helped people to say what they would have said anyway."³ She reminds readers that the CIA overthrew governments, was responsible for the Bay of Pigs operation and the Phoenix Program, spied on American citizens, harassed democratically elected foreign leaders, and plotted assassinations. The CIA denied these activities before Congress and, "in the process, elevated the art of lying to new heights."⁴ Ms. Saunders vents her spleen mainly in her introduction, but in the text she repeatedly returns to the theme that the CIA injured the cause of intellectual freedom by clandestinely supporting (oh, irony of ironies!) champions of intellectual freedom. Not adverse to using clichés, Saunders refers to the CIA at various times as a "wilderness of mirrors," an "invisible government," and a "rogue elephant."

According to Saunders, the list of CIA covert activities during the 1950s and 1960s is long. The Agency subsidized European tours of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and paid for the filming of George Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm*. It clandestinely subsidized the publishing of thousands of books, including an entire line of books by Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., and the renowned work by Milovan Djilas, *The New Class*. It bailed out, and then subsidized, the financially faltering *Partisan Review* and *Kenyon Review*.

The centerpiece of the CIA's propaganda campaign—and the focus of Saunders's book—was the Congress for Cultural Freedom and its principal publication, the journal *Encounter*. Saunders's diligence and hard work shows as she describes the creation, activities, and downfalls of the Congress and the journal. She read the Church Report, performed research in various archives, and conducted many interviews, including some with retired CIA officers.⁵ Her fine writing style and occasionally even gossipy method of presenting the material makes what could have

been a dry-as-dust account of institutions read easily. She also has some fascinating characters, for the people discussed in *The Cultural Cold War* are among the leading intellectual figures of post-World War II Europe and America. She presents these people with wit and occasionally a pen dripping with acid.

After the CIA established and funded the Congress for Cultural Freedom and *Encounter* magazine, did it then call all the shots? Did the Agency determine what the Congress should support or what *Encounter* should publish? Evidently, no. In the 15 years that the Agency “ran” the magazine, *Encounter* probably published about 2,000 articles and reviews. Saunders can cite only two (rather dubious) cases in which the CIA may have intervened to prevent the journal from printing articles.

For Saunders, however, the CIA’s “interference” was much more invidious. She writes that, “The real point was not that the possibility of dissent had been irrevocably damaged...or that intellectuals had been coerced or corrupted (though that may have happened too), but that the natural procedures of intellectual enquiry had been interfered with.”⁶ And, “Whilst *Encounter* never shrank from exposing the useful lies by which communist regimes supported themselves, it was never truly free itself of the bear trap of ideology; of that pervasive Cold War psychology of flying for the truth.’” *Encounter* “suspended that most precious of western philosophical concepts—the freedom to think and act independently—and trimmed its sails to suit the prevailing winds.”⁷ I must admit that as I read such passages, I kept thinking “those poor stupid intellectuals.”

Saunders deserves praise for presenting opposing views. She admits that other people thought and think much differently than she does on the issue of the CIA’s stifling of intellectual freedom. She offers quotes from, inter alia, George Kennan, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Michael Josselson that in effect are rebuttals to her arguments.⁸

She also does a fine job in recounting the intriguing story of how the CIA worked with existing institutions, such as the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, and established numerous “bogus” foundations to “hide” its funding of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and its other covert activities. Everything came a cropper in 1967, however, as a result of press articles, especially revelations in the long-gone *Ramparts* magazine.

The Cultural Cold War has some major shortcomings. First and foremost, despite Saunders’s assertions that the CIA undermined intellectual

freedom, she does not present any examples of people whose intellectual growth was stunted or impaired because of the Agency's programs. Nor does she provide any examples of people switching ideological sides after the revelations about the Agency's role in the Congress and Encounter . She mentions that Jean Paul Sartre switched sides—or just “dropped out” of the Cold War; however, Sartre denounced the Soviet Union and repudiated communism after the USSR invaded Hungary.⁹

Saunders also fails to discuss the results of the CIA programs. Granted, it would be difficult to measure objectively the effectiveness of propaganda programs or campaigns. What did CIA achieve by “running” the Congress for Cultural Freedom and Encounter ? I would venture the guess that Irving Brown and Jay Lovestone won more “hearts and minds” in Western Europe by working with the trade unions than any 20 people involved in the Congress or all the articles in Encounter . (Of course, according to Ms. Saunders, the CIA also subsidized the activities of Brown and Lovestone.) I also suspect that the ham-handed tactics of the Soviet Union and its allies had a far more profound impact on the West European populaces than any Western propaganda program. Saunders, however, is so intent on asserting that the CIA “crippled” West European intellectuals that she does not take time to analyze the effectiveness of the Agency's propaganda campaigns.

Another flaw in *The Cultural Cold War* is that the book discusses only the Western side and barely mentions communist participants in the Cold War. The author does not mention the communist coup in Czechoslovakia in 1948, the Soviet military intervention in East Germany in 1953, or the upheaval in Poland in 1956. There is one sentence each about the Berlin blockade and the Berlin Wall. She does devote two pages to the Soviet invasion of Hungary, but offers several pages on Western “desertion” of the Hungarian rebels. Perhaps Saunders thought her readers would know all about the Soviet cruelties and decided it was unnecessary to discuss or even mention them. A more captious view would be that she did not want to discuss Soviet actions lest it appear that perhaps the CIA and the West in general had real reasons for doing what they did in the “cultural Cold War” in Europe.

The Cultural Cold War contains some silly mistakes and some real gaffes. For example, Charles Bohlen was not the US Ambassador to France in 1948;¹⁰ he became Ambassador to France in 1962. Edward Barrett was never Secretary of State;¹¹ he is correctly identified as an assistant secretary of state elsewhere in the text.¹² The KGB did not have a spy

“planted” on Willy Brandt in West Berlin in 1962;¹³ unless Saunders knows something nobody else does, she is probably mistakenly referring to East German spy Guenter Guillaume, who infiltrated Brandt’s office in Bonn in 1969. If the Cuban missile crisis was an “imperial blunder,” then it was a Soviet imperial blunder, not an American one.¹⁴ Finally, the author relates a story from an interview with former CIA officer Tom Braden that David Rockefeller frequently donated money to aid the CIA, including at one time writing a check for \$50,000 to assist European youth groups.¹⁵ Saunders believes that such “freelance transactions” and “governmental buccaneering” created a culture that eventually resulted in “Oliver North-type disasters.” She says the comparison is “apt” because “like the architect of Irangate” these “earlier friends of the CIA were never once afflicted by doubt in themselves of their purpose.” I think the comparison is absurd.

As should be clear, I do not share Frances Saunders’s opinion about the “morality” of CIA’s activities and do not accept her notion that CIA undermined “intellectual freedom” in Western Europe. I highly enjoyed and strongly recommend her book, however. Consider it to be similar to your favorite TV broadcast: enjoy the program and ignore the commercials.

Footnotes

1. The book was published in 1999 in the United Kingdom with the title *Who Paid the Piper?* Page citations throughout this review are from the paperback edition, published in the United States in 2001.
2. Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, p. 1.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
5. Senator Frank Church was Chairman of the Senate Select Committee that investigated the CIA in the mid-1970s. The official title of the report, published in 1976, was *Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities* .
6. Saunders, p. 409.
7. *Ibid.* , p. 322.