

America's Secret Weapon

A study of how the C.I.A. sponsored modern art exhibitions and literary journals during the cold war.

THE CULTURAL COLD WAR

*The CIA and the World
of Arts and Letters.*

By Frances Stonor Saunders.

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By Josef Joffe

IMAGINE the United States government providing export subsidies not just to peanut farmers or aircraft makers. Imagine also a secretary of culture, financing operas, orchestras and painters especially to promote them abroad. Most card-carrying members of the intelligentsia would vigorously applaud so splendid an idea while bemoaning its utter unreality. Not for us, they lament, the C-word that stands for "state-sponsored culture" and recalls the feudal follies of Europe's princes and potentates.

Yet there was a time when Washington was guilty of such un-American activities in spades. With \$166,000 (worth more than a million of today's dollars), the American taxpayer in 1952 dispatched the Boston Symphony to Europe on a glorious tour that helped establish the Bostonians as among the best in the world. Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, David Smith — artists of the school that came to be known as Abstract Expressionism — were thrust into global fame with help from the feds. Except that the funds were supplied indirectly and clandestinely, with the Congress for Cultural Freedom the main channel and the Central Intelligence Agency the ultimate donor.

The congress, a club of scholars and artists founded in 1950 and subsidized by "the Company" until the late 1960's, encompassed some of the most eminent intellectuals in the West. It published journals and was the host of dozens of conferences while helping writers and thinkers behind the Iron Curtain. The C.I.A. connection is not a new tale; it was first told in 1967 and later embellished in many books and articles. Now, Frances Stonor Saunders, a young British writer and filmmaker, serves up the story again. Wisely, her American publisher has dropped the British title, "Who Paid the Piper?," in favor of the more neutral "Cultural Cold War." For these 500-plus pages do not bear out what the defamatory label insinuated: that some of the greatest in the world of arts and letters were varlets and curs who sold out to the C.I.A. or were manipulated into servitude by

the minions of American imperialism.

"Abstract Expressionism was being deployed as a cold war weapon," Saunders jauntily asserts. That might be true for Socialist Realist kitsch extolling the kolkhoz. But Jackson Pollock's "Number 6" or Mark Rothko's "# 18" cannot be reduced to anti-Communist artillery pieces. Langley's Ivy-trained spooks did what no intelligence service has ever done, or will ever do again: they bankrolled the avant-garde.

Obiter dicta like Saunders's pronouncement above highlight her irreducible problem. It is not that she has written a trashy book; her cultural history is entertaining, even witty (if you like "Yanqui Doodle" as a heading for the chapter on Abstract Expressionism). She has spent years wading through the files and interviewing both protagonists and critics — though her project might have benefited from more rigorous spelling and footnotes.

Some might even forgive her (as this reviewer does not) for resorting to abusive stereotypes when arguments apparently elude her. Take her initial description of Melvin Lasky, a starring figure in her tale of treachery and deceit, who would later become editor of two monthlies subsidized by the Congress for Cultural Freedom. He was also Jewish, as were many of his colleagues in the congress. "Using his oriental-shaped eyes to produce deadly squints," Saunders writes, "he had acquired from the brusque atmosphere of City College an ill manner which rarely deserted him." A sentence away, he turns "lupine." Meet Attila the Wolf. Yet the demise of his journals, *Encounter* and *Monat*, has left lacunas still waiting to be filled.

Everybody who was anybody wrote for those two magazines in the 1950's and 1960's: Isaiah Berlin, V. S. Naipaul, Raymond Aron, Sidney Hook, Hugh Trevor-Roper, A. J. Ayer, Evelyn Waugh, Vladimir Nabokov, Jorge Luis Borges, W. H. Auden, Bertrand Russell. *Encounter*, Saunders concedes, "held a central position in postwar intellectual history. It could be as lively and bitchy as a literary cocktail party." In France, the C.I.A.'s largess, passed through the congress, helped start *Preuves*, which brought a much-needed Anglo-Saxon flavor to a world encapsulated in Cartesian deductivism and Marxist existentialism.

Saunders's difficulty runs deeper than ad hominem slurs and careless sourcing. Her book is shot through with a strident anti-anti-Communism that refuses to accord the Western cause the

moral worth it deserves, considering the wares the totalitarians were hawking. Echoing the conventional multiculturalist critique, Saunders relentlessly equates the sub rosa subsidies of the West with Moscow's heavy-handed propaganda efforts. Her indictment of Communist manipulation is rather perfunctory; there is just enough of it to blunt a charge of apologism.

But for all her postmodernist fervor, Saunders does not mind sinning against her faith when it suits her. One of the creed's central tenets is that nothing can be properly understood, let alone judged, apart from its historical setting — context über alles. Yet Saunders woefully (or willfully) ignores precisely the arena in which the cultural battle of the early cold war unfolded. Convinced that the cold war was but a "fabricated reality," Saunders deftly isolates from its context what she sees as a heinous intelligence plot so that she can drench it all the better in self-righteous, ahistorical wrath. But if the war was make-believe, what were the Soviets doing when they tried to bring Communism to power in France and Italy, when they deported or liquidated "bourgeois" intellectuals in Eastern Europe, when they financed antidemocratic forces everywhere in order to conquer or cow hearts and minds? As Stalin famously put it in 1945: "This war is not as in the past; whoever occupies a territory also imposes on it his own social system. It cannot be otherwise." What was Washington supposed to do? Write letters to the editor? In an all-out war, the ways of the totalitarians must at least partly condition the strategies of the democrats. The C.I.A. could have committed (and surely did commit) worse sins than sponsoring music, magazines and chatfests.

Nonetheless, Saunders's basic point hardly needs laboring: it is the secrecy of the game that sticks in the craw, for it defies the very core of the liberal-democratic faith: transparency, openness, candor. There are no real excuses, just explanations. Ironically, Saunders supplies one of the greatest mitigating circumstances herself when she recounts the endless ego clashes among the denizens of *Encounter*. Describing yet another battle for editorial supremacy — the site was a Congress for Cultural Freedom conference in Milan in 1955 just after Dwight Macdonald had become *Encounter*'s associate editor — Saunders reports: "The delegates' hotel steamed with intrigue. Stuart Hampshire remembered more of

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the boudoir politicking than of the debates themselves (which were, according to Hannah Arendt, 'deadly boring'). . . . Sidney Hook's bedroom became the focus of a cell opposed to Dwight's appointment. A quick shuffle down the corridor led to Arthur Schlesinger's bedroom, which was where the faction in support of Dwight's appointment gathered." For the C.I.A. it must have been easier to run an operation right under Stalin's nose than to control this bickering crowd.

Did "the Company" make editorial policy? Saunders thinks so, but she can document only one case: when an Encounter article by Macdonald was spiked in 1958 because of "its anti-Americanism," as the British co-editor, Stephen Spender, characterized its tone just before his death. Macdonald himself complained after the exposure of the C.I.A. connection in 1967 that he had "been played for a sucker." But even those who did know or suspect had not sold out, for they believed in what they were doing, no matter how hard Saunders tries to skewer their convictions as "another ideology, a 'freedomism.'" George Kennan, later an ardent détenteist, put it succinctly: "This country has no Ministry of Culture, and C.I.A. was obliged to do what it could to try to fill the gap. It should be praised for having done so."

Considering the context, he was right. History confirmed the verdict when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. □

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