

The covert “selling” of anticommunism

The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America

Part 1

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The history of the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)—its coups, assassinations, detention, extraordinary rendition, torture, “black sites,” drone executions, dirty wars and the sponsorship of dictatorial regimes [1]—not only underscores the ruthless, bloody and reactionary role of American imperialism, but most especially the ruling elites’ mortal fear of the working class internationally.

From its founding in 1947, the Agency recognized that global hegemony could not be achieved and sustained by brute repression alone. Accelerating anticolonial struggles, revolutionary struggles in Greece and across Europe, mass struggles and strikes across the world (not the least of which was the Great Strike Wave of 1945-46 in the US [2]) were all deeply influenced by socialist views. Despite the collaboration of the Stalinist regime in the USSR in disarming these movements and assisting in reestablishing the authority of the capitalist governments, the American bourgeoisie was well aware that the fate of their system hung in the balance.

The detailed and engrossing 2008 book, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America*, by Hugh Wilford investigates the CIA’s ideological struggle from 1947 to 1967 to win “hearts and minds” for US capitalism and to prosecute the Cold War.

A dirty business, the CIA devised schemes to create or utilize social organizations, phony pass-through entities, universities, various media, artist groups, foundations and charities to service their propaganda wars—attempting to place a “progressive” or even “humanitarian” veneer upon America’s expanding grip.

Despite the passage of time since the book’s release, it is a pertinent read for its exposure of the modus operandi of the CIA’s ideological campaigns and the role of a section of liberal intelligentsia in supporting it. It is an eye-opener particularly for a younger generation that has been subjected to a decades-long nonstop attempt to whitewash the CIA and US militarism. One gets a picture of the ferociously antidemocratic and reactionary operations of US imperialism and its intelligence apparatus, a clear demonstration of the thoroughly criminal and deceitful nature of US capitalism.

Most important of all, the reader comes away with a sense of the immense significance with which the American ruling elite views the ideological struggle against socialism.

The author correctly emphasizes, “If anything, these practices have intensified in recent years, with the ‘war on terror’ recreating the conditions of total mobilization that prevailed in the first years of the Cold War.” He adds that the Agency is “a growing force on campus.”[3]

The metaphor—a “Mighty Wurlitzer”—was coined by Frank Wisner, the head of the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC), a paramilitary and

psychological operations group created in 1948, which was folded into the CIA in 1951. He prided himself on directing the network of organizations to play any propaganda tune on demand, likening it to the world-famous theater organ.

The Agency sought out those who might be predisposed in a socialistic direction, targeting constituencies that had grievances with the status quo. It selected representatives from ethnic groups, women, African-Americans, labor, intellectuals and academics, students, Catholics and artists and organized them into various front groups to promote anticommunism. These links, in turn, provided the Agency with the cover it needed to influence strategically important sectors of foreign populations.

Ironically, as the federal government was conducting its House Un-American Activities witch-hunts and assembling the attorney general’s List of Subversive Organizations supposedly to ferret out Communist Party “front groups,” the CIA was engaged in a nonstop campaign of subversion. This included creating front groups of thousands of unwitting Americans for covert political operations.

The book exposes how “radical” or “ex-radical,” labor, artistic and middle-class people, a section of the American liberal intelligentsia, found themselves part of this “Wurlitzer.” [4] Significantly, this included a layer of former Communist Party members and fellow travelers, such as novelist Richard Wright, who were disillusioned by their experience with the reactionary Stalinized party, but unable to find their way into the Trotskyist movement and tragically ending up in the arms of the American intelligence apparatus.

The Agency exerted its control over these widely disparate and sometimes rancorous groups primarily through two methods. The first was with large sums of cash—funneled either through big businesses like ITT, wealthy individuals or foundations. Secondly, it vetted and groomed the leaderships of its groups and subjected them to secrecy oaths.

Wilford explains how the secrecy oaths were implemented in the case of the CIA-controlled National Student Association (NSA). “When the CIA judged it necessary to have an unwitting [uninformed of CIA control] officer made aware of the true source of the organization’s funds, a meeting would be arranged between the individual concerned, a witting colleague and a former NSA officer who had gone on to join the Agency. At a prearranged signal, the witting staffer would leave the room. The CIA operative (still identified only as ex-NSA) would explain that the unwitting officer had to swear a secrecy oath before being apprised of some vital secret, and after getting the officer to sign a formal pledge, the operative would then reveal the Agency’s hand in the Association’s affairs.”

Oaths were not just for effect; violation carried a possible 20-year prison sentence. In later years, some of the witting later aptly denounced the operation as entrapment and complained that they were “duped into a relationship with the CIA.” Others were in political agreement and/or saw working with the Agency as a solid career move.

Origins of CIA front groups

Wilford traces the origins of CIA-financed covert groups to the political reorganization of the state under US President Harry S. Truman. Emerging from World War II as the dominant economic, political and military force, the American ruling class sought quickly to take advantage of its position to establish global hegemony.

Truman restructured American military and intelligence forces in line with the developing Cold War and his outlook for geopolitical control dubbed the “Truman Doctrine.” With the National Security Act of 1947, Congress established the CIA, the first permanent American intelligence apparatus, and the National Security Council (NSC). But from its inception there was controversy over whether the CIA’s role should be limited to intelligence-gathering, covert action or both.

The pro-covert action “interventionists” prevailed, Wilford explains. George Kennan, a State Department diplomat and the author of the doctrine of “containment” against the USSR, argued that American politicians needed to overcome the “popular attachment to the concept of a basic difference between peace and war” and adopt covert actions as a legitimate part of its global strategy.

Kennan advocated for the establishment of “liberation committees” to foment anti-Soviet activity, using “indigenous anti-Communist elements” covertly in “threatened countries of the free world,” as well as overt paramilitary activity. These suggestions, the author notes, “set the agenda for all of the United States’ front operations in the first years of the Cold War.”

The first target for the covert recruitment was émigrés from Germany, Eastern Europe and the USSR. Wilford refers here to operation “PAPERCLIP,” codename for the funneling of ex-Nazis with military or technical expertise into the US. He briefly notes the employment of Nazi General Reinhard Gehlen, Hitler’s chief of military intelligence on the Eastern Front, whose network was “folded into” American and, several years later, German intelligence.

Wilford’s unfortunate tendency to sanitize US imperialism repeatedly undermines his exposures, a case in point being his description of the Gehlen connection. For example, rather than Wilford’s rather dry mention of it, Joseph Trento, author of *The Secret History of the CIA*, describes the same facts with more appropriate emphasis.

“...Gehlen convinced [Allen] Dulles [the first civilian director of the CIA, formerly with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the Office of Policy Coordination] that the United States must provide protection for thousands of high-ranking Nazis... ‘Nothing was more important than the recruitment of these Nazis who had escaped all over Europe... You have to remember they were considered the ultimate anti-Communists... the American authorities were willing to recruit any useful Nazi...’” Trento cites Robert T. Crowley, who played a significant role in managing the Nazis for the US.

Trento concludes with the politically incriminating appraisal: “This partnership between the ex-Nazis and the OSS/CIA dominated US activity against the Soviet bloc for the next three decades.” [5]

While Wilford is not prepared to offer such broad assessments, he is particularly adept at uncovering and exposing the details of the CIA’s intricate connections. This is especially compelling when he follows the

money trail, a solid aspect of *The Mighty Wurlitzer* and clearly the result of painstaking research.

The Agency’s creation of the National Committee for a Free Europe (NCFE) in 1949 is an early example. Wilford indicates how its funding formula became a prototype. NCFE appeared as an independent and humanitarian-based organization of American citizens to assist Eastern European refugees. In fact, it was directed from the CIA’s Office of Policy Coordination.

Requiring a cover story to explain the NCFE’s well-appointed offices and hefty bank balances, a fund-raising campaign, the “Crusade for Freedom,” was concocted. The funds raised were not needed for expenses, but they provided plausibility. The expertise of previous public relations campaigns, such as the War Advertising Council (used during World War II to “strengthen civilian morale,” e.g., “sell” war) was now deployed to “sell” the Cold War. It was out of these efforts that Radio Free Europe eventually emerged.

NCFE was among the first of hundreds of such organizations throughout Eastern Europe. They supported “scholarly” projects, had their own publishing house, established myriad ethnic National Councils within the US and funneled money to fascist-sympathizing organizations like Brutus Coste’s Assembly of Captive European Nations.

As the CIA branched out, more groups of potential ideological opponents were targeted. This review will highlight a few of these operations in order to give a sense of the scope and breadth of the American government’s mortal fear of social revolution and the CIA’s preoccupation with maximizing the growth of anticommunism.

Fascinating sections of *The Mighty Wurlitzer*, not detailed here, discuss other areas—the Congress for Cultural Freedom (with offices in 35 countries), the substantial and sordid role of the “Hollywood consortium,” the courting of the abstract impressionist painters, refugee groups as a cover for paramilitary operations, the promotion of “humanitarians” like Dr. Tom Dooley, the regular use of the Museum of Modern Art as a conduit, and women’s correspondence groups, to name a few—which had ties to the Agency through the “umbilical cord of gold.”

Journalists

From today’s vantage point, the suppression of information and collusion of journalists with the CIA is hardly a revelation. Nonetheless, the book points to the early and noteworthy depth of this ongoing relationship.

In 1977, Carl Bernstein calculated that there were about 400 journalists who had worked for the CIA since 1952. But Wilford aptly notes that the *number* of individual journalists processing government stories was far less significant than the institutional collaboration between the Agency and the major news media.

The author points out that Arthur Hays Sulzberger, publisher of the *New York Times*, was a good friend of CIA Director Allen Dulles and signed a secrecy agreement with the Agency. He says that under the terms of this arrangement, the *Times* provided at least 10 CIA officers with cover as reporters or clerical staff in its foreign bureaus, while genuine employees were encouraged to merely spy. The fact was that Dulles cultivated the media—they were excellent sources of information abroad.

Columbia Broadcasting System’s news president was in such constant telephone contact with the CIA headquarters that, Wilford writes, being tired of leaving his office for the proverbial pay phone, he installed a private line to bypass the switchboard.

A third conduit for disseminating CIA “news” was the syndicated news services—the Associated Press and the United Press International—together

with the Agency's in-house operation "Forum World Features."

There were also the newsmagazines. Like the *New York Times*, Henry Luce's *Time* provided CIA officers with journalistic credentials. Wilford notes, "overall...the collaboration was extraordinarily successful, so much so it was difficult to tell precisely where the Luce empire's overseas intelligence network ended and the CIA's began."

Alongside the news services were the indispensable services of the American Newspaper Guild (ANG), the journalists union. The ANG was a founding member of the International Federation of Journalists, a group of anticommunist newspapermen established in Brussels in 1952 to oppose the left-leaning International Organization of Journalists.

Funded by the AFL-CIO and CIA seed money, an ANG staffer developed a campaign for African and Asian journalists. Another ANG representative ran the Inter-American Federation of Working Newspapermen's Organizations with close links to the CIA's South American labor front, the American Institute of Free Labor Development. These CIA fronts offered many free services of a technical and educational character, and were funded by many of the usual CIA pass-through foundations.

To be continued

Notes:

1. A brief list of the brutal covert actions by the CIA after its founding in 1947 include: the 1949 Syrian coup (in the interest of constructing the Trans-Arabian Pipeline); the 1953 overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh (who threatened to nationalize Iran's oil industry under the control of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, now BP); the 1954 overthrow of Guatemalan Jacobo Arbenz (who threatened holdings of the United Fruit Company); the 1961 overthrow and subsequent murder of Congolese Prime Minister and anticolonialist leader Patrice Lumumba; the military coup of General Suharto and the massacre of up to one million Indonesians in 1965-6; fomenting the fascist 1973 coup in Chile; the ouster of the Labour government of Australia in the 1975 "Canberra coup"; the decades-long destabilization of Iraq; running private armies in Afghanistan and Pakistan; and the CIA sponsorship of the fascists at work today in the Ukraine.

2. Over seven million US workers participated in the great strike wave of 1945-46. The strike spanned thousands of workplaces and resulted in citywide general strikes. Eighty General Motors plants were struck in 50 cities. In just over 18 months, 144 millions days of work were lost.

3. As cited by Wilford, "In from the Cold: After Sept 11, the CIA Becomes a Growing Force on Campus," *Wall Street Journal*, 4 October 2002.

4. See the in-depth explanation of the collapse of American liberalism in Chapter 3 of *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century* by David North, Mehring Books, 2014.

5. Trento, Joseph J. *The Secret History of the CIA*. Carroll & Graf Publishers New York, 2001, p 23.



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