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by [Peter Coleman](#)

Review of *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* by Frances Stonor Saunders

I sat in on only one meeting of the board of the International Association for Cultural Freedom, the uneasy successor to the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which had collapsed in 1967 amid the disclosure that the CIA had been funding its activities. This was in Paris in June 1970, the twentieth anniversary almost to the week of the foundation of the Congress in the British sector of occupied Berlin. Representing *Quadrant*, the Australian monthly, I sat among the observers with the other editors: Melvin Lasky (*Encounter*), Leopold Labedz (*Survey*), François Bondy (*Preuves*), Rajat Neogy (*Transition*)—recently released from a Kampala prison—and Hoki Ishihara (*Jiyu*).

The morning began slowly with dispiriting reports on cultural freedom from India and Indonesia to Uganda and Nigeria and some proposals for estimable seminars. But the meeting flared into life in a sharp confrontation between the French poet Pierre Emmanuel and Labedz, whose *Survey* was one of the splendors of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. In both anger and anguish, Labedz complained that the International Association would not face the facts of its failures. There had been no “end of ideology,” he said, no “convergence” in the Cold War, no liberalization in the USSR, no new “world-wide community of intellectuals.” Instead, there had been “a long march through the institutions” that threatened to destroy the universities, politicize cultural life, and appease the Soviet Union. We had no answer to the barbarism of the New Left. Throughout the 1950s, the Congress had exposed the Soviet Union and its fellow travelers. But now we were *détentistes*—to the despair of writers, artists, and intellectuals behind the Iron Curtain. We lacked, he concluded, our former clarity of purpose.

In the tense silence that followed, Edward Shils suggested an adjournment. The next morning, Pierre Emmanuel replied on behalf of the board. A long-bearded poet-prophet, he spoke—for precision, he said—in French. We had all been moved, he began, “par l’accent passionné de notre ami Labedz.” Yet he could not agree with him. He welcomed the New Left, despite its violence. It was trying to fill a spiritual emptiness in life: “the man who lands on the moon is a man of nothing.” His own son-in-law in Latin America had, he said, become a Maoist apostle of *tabula rasa*, of a new beginning from zero. We must not turn away from these young people. But if we are not to be mere *tricheurs*, what are we to tell them? We cannot just talk about the barbarism of the New Left.

Discussion was desultory and inconclusive, and the chairman Alan Bullock soon moved to other business. The minutes record: “No consensus emerged.” It was an epiphanic moment and summed up for me the tensions within the Congress/International Association since its foundation. A movement of and for liberals and social democrats, it was always split between its anti-Communists and its non-Communists, between its Cold Warriors and its accommodationists. The former

prevailed in the first and successful years and the latter in the years of decline.

The opposing assessments of the Congress were clear enough over thirty years ago when the controversy over CIA funding first exploded. Its partisans pointed to its role in the defeat of Stalinism; its critics claimed its influence was small. The one saw it as a story of idealism and courage, the other as a gravy train. The one shrugged off CIA funding, the other insisted it was the real theme. *Pecunia non olet*, cried one: money doesn't smell. He who pays the piper calls the tune, replied the other.

My book *The Liberal Conspiracy: The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Postwar Europe* (Free Press, 1989) acknowledged the Congress's historic success. Now, a new book by Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, brings up to date the contemptuous, leftist perspective.^[1] Since the CIA is her story, she sets out to trace its tentacular reach from Hollywood to MOMA, from Radio Free Europe to PEN International. Her research has delivered some new names, for example, Lawrence de Neufville, the CIA official who recruited Michael Josselson to administer the Congress. She also provides some amusing odds and ends (CIA agents, she says, wrote Fodor travel guides as a cover) and some scuttlebutt (Sonia Orwell is one target).

Saunders also revisits the curious case of Tom Braden, the officer who put together the International Organizations Division in the CIA and later published the most destructive of all the attacks on the Congress for Cultural Freedom. This attack was an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* of May 20, 1967 giving details of CIA funding of student, labor, and cultural organizations, and boasting that it had an "agent" in *Encounter*. The Congress was dissolved soon after the article's appearance. (An editor in Uganda was jailed and one in Japan had his home bombed. In India, the government ordered an inquiry.) Since Braden had signed a secrecy agreement and the CIA had weeks of notice of the article, why had it not taken steps to restrain him before publication or punish him afterwards? Saunders speculates that the CIA may have wanted to be rid of the liberal congress and used Braden. She quotes John Hunt who worked for both the Congress and the CIA: "Maybe [Richard] Helms called him and said 'I've got a job for you.'" Another view is that Braden actually thought his article would help the Congress: its title—"I'm Glad the CIA is 'Immoral'"—was crude but not without bravado.

The persistent weakness of *Who Paid the Piper?* is Saunders's restricted research and imagination. She seems to have no foreign languages; she does not cite Michael Hochgeschwender's major study of the Congress in Germany—*Freiheit in der Offensive?* (1998)—or Pierre Gremion's valuable anthology *Preuves, une revue européenne à Paris* (1989). More significantly, she has no grasp of the nature of the Cold War tensions of the late 1940s when Communists and their fellow travellers expected soon to be able to welcome Stalin's tanks in the streets of Paris and Rome, and many non-Communist intellectuals thought it prudent to adapt to this supposed wave of the future. But some, especially the old refugees from fascist and Communist concentration camps who rallied to the Congress for Cultural Freedom in 1950, were prepared to resist and, if necessary, to go down fighting.

The threat of a world-wide Gulag has receded, and with it the passion of the Cold Warriors. But for Saunders most of them were always ridiculous if not fraudulent figures. She speaks with some generosity of Michael Josselson, the presiding genius of the Congress and a CIA man—she was probably under the influence of his widow Diana Josselson whom she especially thanks (no doubt to Mrs. Josselson's distress) for her time and help. But she describes the distinguished writer and editor Melvin Lasky as "lupine," "ill-mannered," and "oily." Nicholas Nabokov, she says, "faked" a heart episode. Stephen Spender only pretended to be "watery" and "silly" to get what he wanted. According to her, Lionel Trilling was "a pathetic anglophile"; Whittaker Chambers "elevated the art of snitching to new heights" (while Alger Hiss, of course, was not a spy!); and the classic book *The*

God That Failed was a “sham.”

Saunders’s basic theme is that the CIA was a great corrupter. It funded the Congress for Cultural Freedom, treated it as a front, and placed men in key positions to ensure control. But what is her evidence? To win over the world’s intellectuals to the liberal democratic cause, the Congress developed four programs--international conferences and festivals; national committees; a network of magazines of high quality and small circulation; and support for intellectuals behind the Iron Curtain.

Saunders’s case is strongest in relation to the conferences and seminars. While some were of high standards and put important themes and phrases into general circulation (“the end of ideology,” economic growth, destalinization, the Third World), most of the debates were mediocre. Yet their main point was not Socratic dialogue—there wasn’t any—but the informal, personal encounters across national boundaries. After one conference in Bombay, W. H. Auden said that these encounters, “even if forgotten, may enter the structure and fabric of one’s being.” They intimated the emergence of a world-wide liberal community, and only fools or philistines would dismiss this as unimportant. The national committees were more pragmatic. The most active of all (with Sidney Hook, James T. Farrell, and Diana Trilling) was in New York and was no CIA tool. It was in permanent conflict with the Congress in Paris and—as Saunders shows—the CIA acknowledged its turbulent independence. The same is true, if less dramatically, of the Indian and Australian committees, but Saunders does not mention them. The Congress’s Central European Program—books and subscriptions, travel and publication in the West for writers of the Soviet bloc, and help for refugees starting a new life—was an unqualified success. Raymond Aron thought it was the most influential of all the Congress programs. But it does not fit Saunders’s theme and she does not mention it, either.

The network of excellent “little magazines” such as *Encounter*, *Survey*, *Preuves*, and *Der Monat* was another great achievement. As evidence that the CIA controlled these publications, Saunders once more recalls *Encounter*’s widely debated rejection of an article by Dwight Macdonald attacking American life. The truth is, however, that the piece was rejected not because it was critical of America—*Encounter* routinely carried more telling criticism of America (by, for example, Bertrand Russell and Aldous Huxley)—but because it was a poor article. The angry exchanges on editorial policy in the 1950s between the editor Irving Kristol and Michael Josselson show beyond doubt the independence of *Encounter*.

Saunders does not even suggest control, actual or attempted, over Labeledz’s *Survey*, let alone over smaller magazines such as Michael Polanyi’s *Science and Freedom* (England), James McAuley’s *Quadrant* (Australia), Nissim Ezekiel’s *Quest* (India), or Rajat Neogy’s *Transition* (Uganda). She appears not to have read *Der Monat* or *Preuves*. This world-wide network with its unruly editors published many of the most independent writers of the day—Raymond Aron, Daniel Bell, Isaiah Berlin, Albert Camus, Robert Conquest, Stuart Hampshire, Arthur Koestler, Walter Laqueur, Richard Lowenthal, Czeslaw Milosz, Edward Shils, H. R. Trevor-Roper, Lionel Trilling, George Urban ... the list goes on and on. In their contribution to understanding totalitarianism in a period of lies and illusion, these magazines were compulsory reading. They are still a rich historical resource.

When there was talk of closing down *Encounter* at the time of the CIA controversy in the late 1960s, forty of England’s leading writers from Kingsley Amis to Arnold Wesker signed a letter to the editor Melvin Lasky describing the magazine as “indispensable” and concluding: “our support remains undiminished.” Saunders does not mention this letter. Irving Kristol once said to me that it had been easy to found *Encounter* in 1953 because “There was nothing to read in England then.” What is one to say today, now that *Encounter* is gone?

It was clearly a bad idea to have the bills paid by a secret service. Yet there was no alternative in the

emergency of 1949–1950. At that crucial moment, some of America’s leaders saw the importance of helping anti-Communist liberals work out their ideas without interference. They should be honored for it, although not for continuing the secret funding for seventeen years. George F. Kennan summed up the situation with his familiar perspicacity and balance:

It is unfair that it [the CIA] should be so bitterly condemned for its failures, and should then go unpraised when it does something constructive and sensible. And the Congress [for Cultural Freedom] would itself have been remiss if it had failed to take money which came to it from good intent and wholly without strings or conditions.

It is symptomatic of the shabbiness of *Who Paid the Piper?* that Saunders should dismiss Kennan as an agent of corruption and a Cold Warrior.

Notes

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1. *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, by Frances Stonor Saunders; Granta Books, 509 pages, £20. [Go back to the text.](#)

Peter Coleman's poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, *Image*, and other publications.

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