Freedom's Laboratory: The Cold War Struggle for the Soul of Science

Audra J. Wolfe (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 302 pp.

Reviewed by J.R. Seeger

At the end of World War II, the victorious Western powers of the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada, along with the recently liberated Western European nations of France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, faced a new and more complex European challenge from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The leadership of the USSR described in detail and in public their commitment to expanding the communist revolution throughout Europe and into Asia. In his famous speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, Winston Churchill captured the West's concern by stating, "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an Iron Curtain has descended across the continent."[a]

Countries the Soviet armies liberated held elections under Soviet control. By 1949, all of these countries had become "socialist republics" allied to the USSR. In October 1949, the People's Republic of China defeated the forces of the Republic of China and established control over all of mainland China. International communist organizations created by the USSR sponsored Communist International or Comintern, were revived by the USSR and began political activities throughout Western Europe. To the leaders of the West, the actions of the USSR demonstrated the return of an expansionist effort on the part of the Kremlin consistent with actions observed and, to some extent, countered in the 1920s and early 1930s. The Soviet blockade of West Berlin between 1948 and 1949, the test of a nuclear device in August 1949, along with the Soviet success in launching Sputnik, the world's first orbiting satellite in October 1957 underscored the seriousness of the new, superpower competition.

Alone among the Western Allies, the United States had survived World War II without widespread destruction of its cities and industries. The United States could and, in fact, did commit to military confrontation in the face of Soviet expansion and to creation of alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in April of 1949. However, US presidents throughout the Cold War realized that the risk of nuclear war in any world war scenario would devastate America and the West, regardless of how successful US and allied forces might be against the USSR. There had to be another way to stop Soviet aggression and, over time, even roll back Soviet control over Eastern Europe. The most famous effort in the earliest days of the Cold War was the Marshall Plan, in which the United States offered to help rebuild Europe on either side of the Iron Curtain. Financial support to the struggling economies of Western Europe from 1948 to 1952 forged a political and economic alliance in the West as strong as any of the military alliances created during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. From the "political warfare" standpoint, the Marshall Plan's success was enhanced by Soviet instructions to their surrogates in the Eastern Bloc to reject any Western support.

It is in this Cold War context that Dr. Wolfe's book, *Freedom's Laboratory*, begins. The US leadership both in the White House and in Congress was convinced that the Soviet Union was committed to the destruction of the West. Any/all measures that might prevent, or at least delay, a conflict between the two nuclear armed superpowers had to be taken. In her previous work, *Competing with the Soviets,*[b] Dr. Wolfe focused primarily on the overt political economy of the "military-industrial complex" and the effects on scientific and technology research, most especially in the 1950s and early 1960s. Using this research as a starting point and then by working through recently declassified materials, Dr. Wolfe focuses her attention in this new book on the clandestine efforts of the CIA to influence science and scientists in support of a larger US policy to counter Soviet propaganda.

The general details of this effort as described in *Freedom's Laboratory* will not be new to any student of the Cold War or covert influence. What might be surprising

a. Westminster College archives. www.westminster-mo.edu.

b. *Competing with the Soviets: Science, Technology, and the State in Cold War America* (Johns Hopkins University Press 2013).

are some of her stated perspectives. In the introduction, Dr. Wolfe says,

> *Early Cold War psychological warfare campaigns consistently contrasted US individualism with Soviet collectivism. Given the near impossibility of conveying this message through government-sponsored programs, most of this work was carried out by private individuals, not all of whom realized they were participating in US psychological warfare campaigns. This brings us to one of the US government's more curious choices in the fight against Communism. From 1950 until 1967, when its covers were blown, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) funded and supervised a number of nominally private organizations engaged in the work of cultural diplomacy.* (5)

In fact, the "curious choice" described in her introduction is covered in great detail in Hugh Wilford's book, *The Mighty Wurlitzer*[a] in 2008 and, recently, in Sarah Miller Harris's book, *The CIA and the Congress for Cultural Freedom in the Early Cold War*.[b] It was a clear choice on the part of the White House to direct the CIA to conduct the operations. George Kennan, the head of the Policy Planning Staff (PPS) at the State Department understood the importance of the program, but this type of effort was outside State's remit. Director of Central Intelligence Roscoe Hillenkoetter wanted the CIA to focus exclusively on intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination and to stay clear of what the Office of Strategic Services in World War II would have called "special operations" and "morale operations." The White House had to direct the DCI using National Security Directive NSC-4A to run the operation.

Frank Wisner and his team at the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) within CIA ran covert influence operations throughout the early Cold War, often with direction from Kennan at the PPS. They did so using a number of different front organizations, which were funded through complex, clandestine networks. In most cases, OPC operations focused on delivering strategic guidance for what today would be called influence "payload." OPC allowed the front organizations and their employees, who were often completely unwitting of US involvement, to design the specifics of the payload. This was not in any way a "curious choice." It was the only credible choice.

What makes Dr. Wolfe's work worth reading is that as a scholar in the history of science she focuses on one specific target audience in the Wurlitzer enterprise: scientists. As she says in the introduction,

> *Over the past twenty-five years, historians and journalists have produced dozens, perhaps even hundreds of books and articles documenting the extraordinary range of this cultural offensive, in both its overt and covert forms. Science is oddly absent from these accounts.* (5)

Given the subtitle of the book, focusing on the "soul of science," Dr. Wolfe does not hide her perspective on the US effort to influence the international scientific community. However, Wolfe admits in the penultimate chapter,

> *Unlike most of the United States' other attempts to destroy Communism through culture, science diplomacy worked. Not in the way that Frank Wisner's Office of Policy Coordination or Michael Josselson's Congress for Cultural Freedom intended—Soviet intellectuals didn't defect en masse or attempt to overthrow the Kremlin. . . . Nevertheless, by the time the Cold War ended, Soviet scientists were more likely to quote H.J. Muller than J.D. Bernal on the question of "party lines" of science. (197).*

Unfortunately, in the epilogue, Dr. Wolfe crosses the line into polemics. In this final chapter, she focuses her writing not on summarizing her work but on the complex world in the second decade of the 21st century and specifically in the first two years of the administration of President Trump. She writes:

> *The postwar scenario in the United States, in which (white, male) scientists received virtually unlimited research funds to investigate whatever they wanted, so long as their questions didn't upset existing power structures, was a historical anomaly rather than a naturally occurring state of affairs. For a brief twenty-year period, the public at large and the country's political leadership deferred to elite judgment—including that of scientists—in a tacit agreement that elites would contribute to the national interest. Now*

a. *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Harvard University Press, 2008). See former CIA historian Michael Warner's review in *Studies in Intelligence* 52 no. 2 (June 2008).
b. *The CIA and the Congress for Cultural Freedom in the Early Cold War: The Limits of Making Common Cause* (Routledge, 2016).

that the structures of power no longer value independent thought, a common public good, or global opinion, US scientists are at a loss to explain why the government should support an autonomous scientific community. (207)

It is worth noting that CIA influence efforts took place under four presidents, Democrat and Republican. It is equally important to consider the context of the program. For those of us who lived at a time when elementary school children participated in air raid drills and when Americans were encouraged to build bomb shelters, it is easy to forgive any effort to influence international science in ways that might delay or disrupt a Soviet attack on the United States. Kevin McCauley's recent (2016) independently published work on KGB influence operations is also essential reading in any effort to balance OPC operations against the context of Soviet campaigns. McCauley offers a detailed explanation of how KGB coordinated as many as 10 different tactics in their covert actions.[a] Deception, provocation, fabrication, agents of influence, disinformation, and even political assassination were combined as part of Soviet "active measures." OPC's operations seem almost "gentlemanly" in comparison. As with any analysis of historic decisionmaking, the often quoted first line of L.P. Harley's novel is a useful starting point: *The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.*[b]

Even with these caveats and the pointed epilogue that strays far from the early Cold War, Dr. Wolfe's research on this subject is extensive and covers published and, importantly, recently declassified material. In an appendix entitled "Sources and Methods" the author describes in detail her work with archival material, and it is impressive. This means that even if a reader does not agree with her perspective, it would be a mistake to not read this book.

However, Dr. Wolfe might have spent more effort learning how the Intelligence Community worked (and works) and how it is directed from the White House through National Security Directives and other instructions—usually readily available in the National Archives, presidential libraries, and elsewhere. Covert action has been the responsibility of CIA, a responsibility defined in various national security authorizations, US Code Title 50, and by virtually every president since the creation of CIA in 1947. But, these types of operations only take place at the specific direction of the president, delivered via formal directives from the National Security Council.

a. Kevin N. McCauley, *Russian Influence Campaigns Against the West* (Create Space Independent Publishing, 2016), 6.

b. L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (Penguin Books, 1973).

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The reviewer: J. R. Seeger is a retired CIA operations officer and frequent contributor of reviews.