

Cultural cold war

Origins of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, 1949-50

Michael Warner

Give me a hundred million dollars and a thousand dedicated people, and I will guarantee to generate such a wave of democratic unrest among the masses—yes, even among the soldiers—of Stalin's own empire, that all his problems for a long period of time, to come will be internal. I can find the people.

Sidney Hook, 1949

The Congress for Cultural Freedom is widely considered one of the CIA's more daring and effective Cold War covert operations. It published literary and political journals such as *Encounter*, hosted dozens of conferences bringing together some of the most eminent Western thinkers, and even did what it could to help intellectuals behind the Iron Curtain. Somehow this organization of scholars and artists—egotistical, free-thinking, and even anti-American in their politics—managed to reach out from its Paris headquarters to demonstrate that Communism, despite its blandishments, was a deadly foe of art and thought. Getting such people to cooperate at all was a feat, but the Congress's Administrative Secretary, Michael Josselson, kept them working together for almost two decades until the Agency arranged an amicable separation from the Congress in 1966.

The Congress for Cultural Freedom—despite the embarrassing exposure of its CIA sponsorship in 1967—ultimately helped to negate Communism's appeal to artists

and intellectuals, undermining at the same time the Communist pose of moral superiority. But while CIA sponsorship of the Congress has long been publicly known, the origins of that relationship have remained obscure, even to Agency veterans who worked on the project.

The Congress itself sprang from a conference of intellectuals in West Berlin in June 1950, a gathering that itself marked a landmark in the Cold War. By a lucky stroke, the conference opened just a day after North Korea invaded the South. This coincidence lent unexpected timeliness and urgency to the conference's message: that some of the best minds of the West—representing a wide range of disciplines and political viewpoints—were willing to defy the still-influential opinion that Communism was more congenial to culture than was bourgeois democracy. Historians have surmised that this event had some CIA connection, but the handful of CIA officers who knew the full story are dead, and scholars today tend to skirt this issue because of the lack of documentation.

Agency files reveal the true origins of the Berlin conference. Besides setting the Congress in motion, [the Berlin conference in 1950] helped to solidify CIA's emerging strategy of promoting the non-Communist left—the strategy that would soon become the theoretical foundation of the Agency's political operations against Communism over the next two decades.

This article is an excerpt from a larger classified draft study of CIA involvement with anti-Communist groups in the Cold War. The author retains a footnoted copy of the article in the CIA History Staff. This version of the article has been redacted for security considerations (phrases in brackets denote some of the redactions).

A Conference in New York

In March 1949, New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel played host to one of the strangest gatherings in American history. Less than four years after Allied troops had liberated Hitler's concentration camps, 800 prominent literary and artistic figures congregated in the Waldorf to call for peace at any price with Stalin, whose own *gulag* had just been restocked with victims of his latest purge. Americans, including Lillian Hellman, Aaron Copland, Arthur Miller, and a young Norman Mailer, joined with European and Soviet delegates to repudiate "US warmongering." Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich told the delegates that "a small clique of hate-mongers" was preparing a global conflagration; he urged progressive artists to struggle against the new "Fascists" who were seeking world domination. American panelists echoed the Russian composer's fear of a new conflict. Playwright Clifford Odets denounced the "enemies of Man" and claimed the United States had been agitated into "a state of holy terror" by fraudulent reports of Soviet aggression; composer Copland declared "the present policies of the American Government will lead inevitably into a third world war."

The Waldorf conference marked another step in the Communist Information Bureau's (Cominform) campaign to shape Western opinion. A series of Soviet-sponsored cultural conferences beginning in September 1948 called for world peace and denounced the policies of the Truman administration. The conference at the Waldorf-Astoria, however, was the first to convene in a Western country and, not coincidentally, was also the first to meet organized and articulate opposition.

The Cominform could hardly have picked a riskier place than New York City to stage a Stalinist peace conference. New York's large ethnic neighborhoods were filled with refugees from Communism, and its campuses and numerous cultural and political journals employed hundreds of politically left-leaning men and women who had fought in the ideological struggles over Stalinism that divided American labor unions, college faculties, and cultural organizations before World War II.

Stealing the Show

A handful of liberal and socialist writers, led by philosophy professor Sydney Hook, saw their chance to steal a little of the publicity expected for the Waldorf peace conference. A fierce ex-Communist himself, Hook was then teaching at New York University and editing a socialist magazine called *The New Leader*. Ten years earlier he and his mentor John Dewey had founded a controversial group called the Committee for Cultural Freedom, which attacked both Communism and Nazism. He now organized a similar committee to harass the peace conference in the Waldorf-Astoria.

Hook's new group called itself the Americans for Intellectual Freedom. Its big names included critics Dwight MacDonald and Mary McCarthy, composer Nicolas Nabokov, and commentator Max Eastman. Arnold Beichman, a labor reporter friendly with anti-Communist union leaders, remembered the excitement of tweaking the Soviet delegates and their fellow conferees: "We didn't have any staff, we didn't have any salaries to pay anything. But inside of about one day the place was just busting with people volunteering." One of Beichman's union friends persuaded the sold-out Waldorf to base Hook and his group in a three-room suite ("I told them if you don't get that suite we'll close the hotel down," he explained to Beichman), and another union contact installed 10 phone lines on a Sunday morning.

Hook and his friends stole the show. They asked embarrassing questions of the Soviet delegates at the conference's panel discussions and staged an evening rally of their own at nearby Bryant Park. News stories on the peace conference reported the activities of the Americans for Intellectual Freedom in detail. "The only paper that was against us in this reporting was *The New York Times*," recalled Beichman. "It turned out years later that [*The Times* reporter] was a member of the Party."

Covert Action Prospect

In Washington, members of Frank Wisner's fledgling Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) chuckled at the news reports from New York and wondered how a group like the Americans for Intellectual Freedom could help OPC and the CIA in countering the Soviet peace offensive. OPC was the Agency's new covert action arm, a bureaucratic hybrid formed only a few months earlier and still struggling to establish a mission and identity. (It comprised only a handful of staffers in the spring of 1949, and it looked to the State Department and private contacts for operational ideas). Soviet operatives, on the other hand, had a wealth of experience to draw from, having learned from the late Willi Münzenberg before the war how to build front groups that were ostensibly non-Communist—and thus attractive to liberals and socialists—but were still responsive to Soviet direction. OPC had no such expertise, but it did have a cadre of energetic and well-connected staffers willing to experiment with unorthodox ideas and controversial individuals if that was what it took to challenge the Communists at their own game. •

The day after the Waldorf congress closed, Wisner's flamboyant and ubiquitous aide Carmel Offie asked the Department of State what it intended to do about the next big peace conference, scheduled for Paris in late April. Offie was Wisner's special assistant for labor and émigré affairs, personally overseeing two of OPC's most important operations: the National Committee for Free Europe, [and other operatives who] passed OPC money to anti-Communist unions in Europe. Offie dealt often with Irving Brown, who had extensive Continental contacts.

In response to Offie, the Department of State cabled Paris proposing a US-orchestrated response to the conference, but Wisner in Washington and Brown in New York thought the suggested steps too weak. OPC took matters into its own hands in the bold but ad hoc manner that marked the Office's early operations. A series of meetings and conversations over the next few days resulted in a new plan, which OPC communicated through at least three separate channels. At the time there [were few] OPC station[s] abroad, and various officials acted] as the Office's representative[s]. One of them] soon heard from Brown and Raymond Murphy of

State's Office of European Affairs. Wisner himself cabled Averell Harriman of the Economic Cooperation Administration (the managers of the Marshall Plan) seeking 5 million francs (roughly \$16,000) to fund a counterdemonstration. Murphy graphically explained the need for a response to the Communist peace offensive:

Now the theme is that the United States and the Western democracies are the war-mongers and Fascists and the Kremlin and its stooges the peace-loving democracies. And there is a better than even chance that by constant repetition the Commies can persuade innocents to follow this line. Perhaps not immediately but in the course of the next few years because there is a tremendous residue of pacificism [sic], isolationism and big business [sic] to be exploited. For example, a recession in the United States might cause people to lose interest in bolstering Europe I think you will agree that this phony peace movement actually embraces far more than intellectuals and that any counter-congress should emphasize also that the threat to world peace comes from the Kremlin and its allies.

Working with Brown, [OPC's representative] contacted French socialist David Rousset and his allies at the breakaway leftist newspaper *Franc-Tireur*, which in turn organized a meeting called the International Day of Resistance to Dictatorship and War, inviting Sidney Hook and other prominent anti-Communists. OPC covertly paid the travel costs of the German, Italian, and American delegations. The latter included Hook and novelist James T. Farrell; both were unwitting of OPC's involvement.

Disappointment in Paris

The Paris counter-conference on 30 April 1949 disappointed its American backers. Although it attracted prominent anti-Stalinists and provoked blasts from the French Communist Party, its tone was too radical and neutralist for Hook and Farrell. OPC and State agreed with Hook's assessment. The main problem, Offie

noted, was the barely concealed anti-Americanism of the *Franc-Tireur* group and many of the intellectuals it had invited. This flaw was aggravated by the loose organization of the meeting itself, which at one point was disrupted by a noisy band of anarchists. Offie did not believe that OPC had to rely on *Franc-Tireur* to reach European anti-Stalinists. Wisner added a pointed postscript to Offie's memo:

We are concerned lest this type of leadership for a continuing organization would result in the degeneration of the entire idea (of having a little DEMINFORM) into a nuts folly of miscellaneous goats and monkeys whose antics would completely discredit the work and statements of the serious and responsible liberals. We would have serious misgivings about supporting such a show [emphasis added].

One small forward step was taken in Paris, however. Hook had chatted with a former editor of *The New Leader* named Melvin Lasky about the prospects for a permanent committee of anti-Communist intellectuals from Europe and America. This idea would soon take on a life of its own.

Considering Berlin

Several people in Europe and America almost simultaneously decided that what was needed was a real conference of anti-Communists. Paris would have been the logical choice, but, as was demonstrated in April, Paris seemed too ethereal, evanescent, and neutralist in the struggle between liberty and tyranny. Parisians who cared about world affairs were often Stalinists; novelist Arthur Koestler quipped that from Paris the French Communist Party could take over all of France with a single phone call.

Berlin was much better. Surrounded by the Red Army and just recently rescued from starvation by the US Air Force's heroic resupply efforts, West Berlin was an island of freedom in a Communist sea. The Soviet blockade of Berlin had been lifted in May 1949, but morale in the Western sector had flagged over the summer as the proud but exhausted West Berliners wondered what would befall them next.

In August 1949, a crucial meeting took place in Frankfurt. American journalist Melvin J. Lasky, together with a pair of ex-Communists, Franz Borkenau and Ruth Fischer, hatched a plan for an international conference of the non-Communist Left in Berlin the following year. Lasky, only 29, was already prominent in German intellectual circles as the founding editor of *Der Monat*, a journal sponsored by the American occupation government that brought Western writers once more into the ken of the German public. Borkenau too had been in Paris the previous April as a disappointed member of the German delegation. Fischer—whose given name was Elfriede Eisler—was the sister of Gerhart Eisler, a Soviet operative dubbed in 1946 “the Number-One Communist in the US” and convicted the following year for falsifying a visa application. She herself had been a leader of the German Communist Party before her faction was expelled on orders from Moscow, leading her to break with Stalin (and with her brother Gerhart).

Ruth Fischer mentioned the plan to a diplomat friend[:]

I think we talked about this plan already during my last stay in Paris, but I have now a much more concrete approach to it. I mean, of course, the idea of organizing a big Anti-Waldorf-Astoria Congress in Berlin itself. It should be a gathering of all ex-Communists, plus a good representative group of anti-Stalinist American, English, and European intellectuals, declaring its sympathy for Tito and Yugoslavia and the silent opposition in Russia and the satellite states, and giving the Politburo hell right at the gate of their own hell. All my friends agree that it would be of enormous effect and radiate to Moscow, if properly organized. It would create great possibilities for better co-ordination afterwards and would also lift the spirits of Berlin anti-Stalinists, which are somewhat fallen at present.

Fischer hoped to talk to “a few friends in Washington” about the idea during her trip there that fall.

[OPC's representative] pouched the Fischer proposal to Offie in mid-September. [OPC] officers seemed unimpressed with the Berlin conference idea, but Offie still thought the proposal was worth a closer look.

Offie's interest notwithstanding, the Berlin congress idea remained in a bureaucratic limbo for the next two months. No one apparently seemed to know quite what to do with it. American occupation authorities in Germany probably knew that the proposed conclave would have little credibility among European intellectuals if it were obviously sponsored by the US Government. At the same time, Truman administration officials were not exactly looking for motley bands of former Communists to sponsor at a time when the White House was already taking flak at home for being soft on Communism.

An Ideal Organizer

The answer was covert funding. Michael Josselson stepped forward to promote the proposal late in 1949. Josselson had witnessed the shaky beginnings of the anti-Communist counteroffensive in New York and Paris that spring while he was still working as a cultural officer for the American occupation government in Germany. He told his composer friend Nicolas Nabokov that Berlin needed something similar. At some point that autumn Josselson talked with Melvin Lasky about the Berlin conference idea.

Josselson was the perfect man for the job of putting together such an event. Born in Estonia in 1908, his father, a Jewish timber merchant, moved his family to Berlin during the Russian Revolution. As a young man Josselson attended the Universities of Berlin and Freiburg, but he took a job as a buyer for the American Gimbels-Saks retail chain before he earned a degree. Gimbels eventually made him its chief European buyer and transferred him to Paris in 1935, and then on to New York before the war. Josselson became an American citizen in 1942. Drafted the following year, he made sergeant and served as an interrogator for the US Army in Europe. Like Melvin Lasky, Josselson stayed on in Berlin after demobilization to work with the American occupation government. Berlin was an ideal post for Josselson, who spoke English, French, German, and Russian with equal ease.

The drama and intrigue of postwar Berlin awakened something in Josselson and gave him scope to exercise his considerable talents as an operator, administrator, and innovator. His enthusiasm was boundless, his energy immense.

In Josselson's capable hands the still-amorphous Fischer plan took specific shape. Where Fischer had proposed an essentially political gathering, the self-taught Josselson sensed that an explicitly cultural and intellectual conference, to be called "the Congress for cultural freedom," could seize the initiative from the Communists by reaffirming "the fundamental ideals governing cultural (and political) action in the Western world and the repudiation of all totalitarian challenges."

With the backing of several prominent Berlin academics, a committee of American and European thinkers would organize the event and invite participants, selecting them on the basis of their political outlook, their international reputation and their popularity in Germany. In addition, the congress could be used to bring about the creation of some sort of permanent committee, which, with a few interested people and a certain amount of funds, could maintain the degree of intellectual and rhetorical coordination expected to be achieved in Berlin. The Josselson proposal reached Washington in January 1950.

Michael Josselson's interest in the congress idea gave Lasky all the encouragement he needed. Lasky, unwitting of OPC's hand in the plan, forged ahead while official Washington made up its mind. He sent a similar proposal of his own to Sidney Hook, his old boss, who liked the idea. In February, Lasky enlisted Ernst Reuter, Lord Mayor of West Berlin, and several prominent German academics, who endorsed the plan and promised their support. Together these men formed a standing committee and began issuing invitations.

Lasky's freelancing, however, was not all for the good. As an employee of the American occupation government, his activities on behalf of the congress struck

more than a few observers, both friendly and hostile, as proof that the US Government was behind the event. This would later cause trouble for Lasky.

OPC officers also liked Josselson's plan. Headquarters produced a formal project proposal envisioning a budget of \$50,000. Time was of the essence, although OPC soon realized that the congress would have to be postponed to May or even June. Wisner approved the project outline, which essentially reiterated Josselson's December proposal, on 7 April, adding that he wanted Lasky and Burnham kept out of sight in Berlin for fear their presence would only provide ammunition to Communist critics of the event.

Enthusiastic Response

It was already too late to rein in Lasky. He had appointed himself the driving force behind the event, inviting participants and organizing programs. Josselson defended Lasky when informed of Wisner's comment. Josselson explained that Lasky's name on the event's masthead as General Secretary had been largely responsible for the enthusiasm that the congress had generated among European intellectuals. "No other person here, certainly no German, could have achieved such success," cabled Josselson.

The congress in Berlin rolled ahead that spring gathering sponsors and patrons. World-renowned philosophers John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, Benedetto Croce, Karl Jaspers, and Jacques Maritain agreed to lend *gravitas* to the event as its honorary chairmen. OPC bought tickets for the American delegation, using [several intermediary organizations] as its travel agents. Hook and another NYU philosophy professor named James Burnham took charge of the details for the American delegation. The Department of State proved an enthusiastic partner in the enterprise, arranging travel, expenses, and publicity for the delegates. Indeed, Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs Jesse MacKnight was so impressed with the American delegation that he urged CIA to sponsor the congress on a continuing basis even before the conclave in Berlin had taken place.

Dramatic Opening

The Congress for Cultural Freedom convened in Berlin's Titania Palace on 26 June 1950. American delegates Hook, James Burnham, James T. Farrell, playwright Tennessee Williams, historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., actor Robert Montgomery, and chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission David Lilienthal had been greeted on their arrival the previous day with the news that troops of North Korea had launched a massive invasion of the South. This pointed reminder of the vulnerability of Berlin itself heightened the sense of apprehension in the hall. The Congress's opening caught and reflected this mood. Lord Mayor Reuter asked the almost 200 delegates and the 4,000 other attendees to stand for a moment of silence in memory of those who had died fighting for freedom or who still languished in concentration camps.

The time had come to choose sides. Austrian physicist and Congress panelist Hans Thirring dramatized this feeling by repudiating his own prepared remarks, which were essentially neutralist in tone, because the Korean invasion had betrayed his trust in Stalin's peaceful aspirations. German writer Theodor Plievier made a spectacular entrance after flying in from hiding in West Germany, defying the danger that he might be kidnapped by the Soviets or East Germans while visiting Berlin.

Leadership of the Congress sessions spontaneously devolved on two eloquent Europeans with very different views: the Italian socialist Ignazio Silone and the Anglicized Hungarian writer Arthur Koestler. Although both had penned autobiographical essays about their breaks with the Party for a new book titled *The God That Failed*, they represented the two poles of opinion over the best way to oppose the Communists. Koestler favored the rhetorical frontal assault, and his attacks sometimes spared neither foe nor friend. Silone was subtler, urging the West to promote social and political reforms in order to co-opt Communism's still-influential moral appeal.



Sidney Hook speaking at the opening session.

These competing themes lent a certain dramatic tension to the Congress, but their rivalry by itself helped to make the point that debate in the West is truly free, with room for all shades of anti-totalitarian opinion. In the end, it was liberty that really mattered. "Friends, freedom has seized the offensive!" shouted Koestler as he read the Congress's Freedom Manifesto before 15,000 cheering Berliners at the closing rally on 29 June. The irony was subtle but real; Koestler had once worked for Soviet operative Willi Münzenberg managing front groups for Moscow, and now he was unwittingly helping the CIA's efforts to establish a new organization designed to undo some of the damage done by Stalin's agents over the last generation.

Epilogue

Having set the Congress in motion, OPC sat back and watched while events played themselves out. The men that OPC brought together in Berlin needed no coaching on the finer points of criticizing Communism. Josselson kept out of sight, although he kept track of everything that transpired. In Josselson's eyes, Silone seems to have won his debate with Koestler; Josselson personally eschewed the frontal assault in favor of the subtle approach. Indeed, Josselson's Congress for Cultural Freedom would later be criticized (by American anti-Communists, in particular) for tolerating too much



Author Arthur Koestler, Irving Brown, and Professor James Burnham.

criticism of America's own shortcomings by figures on the anti-Communist left. And thus was born not only the Congress for Cultural Freedom but also one of its most controversial features.

Reactions in the US Government to the Berlin conference initially ranged from pleased to ecstatic. Wisner offered his "heartiest congratulations" to all involved. OPC's political sponsors were also gratified. Defense Department representative Gen. John Magruder deemed it "a subtle covert operation carried out on the highest intellectual level" and "unconventional warfare at its best" in a memo to Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson. American occupation officials in Germany sensed the Congress had given a palpable boost to the morale of West Berlin, but believed the event's most important effect would ultimately be felt by Western

intellectuals who had been politically adrift since 1945. Although Congress delegates had argued over strategies for combating Stalinism, their spontaneous and sincere unanimity in denouncing tyranny of all stripes had "actually impelled a number of prominent cultural leaders to give up their sophisticated, contemplative detachment in favor of a strong stand against totalitarianism."

Almost before the last chairs were folded in Berlin, [at least one OPC officer] began campaigning for covert backing for the Congress on a permanent basis. Wisner agreed that a standing Congress could pull European opinion away from neutralism, but ordered Lasky and Burnham removed from prominent positions in any



Final session (at Funkturm).

ongoing project. Burnham was happy to step aside, agreeing that he made an easy target for Communist critics of the Congress.

The unwitting Lasky was another matter, at least as far as [one OPC officer] was concerned. Josselson had defended Lasky in April, and OPC's new Eastern Europe Division (EE) agreed with Josselson that Lasky had been a key to the Congress's success. This apologia infuriated Wisner because it betrayed "an unfortunate tendency, apparently more deeprooted than I had suspected, to succumb to the temptation of convenience (doing things the easy way)."

In a scathing memo to EE, Wisner declared himself "very disturbed" by the "non-observance" of his April command to have Lasky moved to the sidelines of the

project; Lasky's visibility was "a major blunder and was recognized as such by our best friends in the State Department." Wisner made himself clear: unless the headstrong Lasky was removed from the Congress for Cultural Freedom, OPC would not support the organization. He tempered this bitter pill a little in a postscript. According to Wisner, Secretary of Defense Johnson was so impressed with the Berlin conference that he had sung its praises before President Truman, who was reported to be "very well pleased."

EE had no choice but to cable Wisner's instructions to Germany. [The OPC officer who received it exploded] and cabled back a histrionic protest, but there was nothing to be done. Lasky had to go, and OPC contrived to have him removed from the project.

With Burnham and Lasky gone, the Congress's steering committee established the organization as a permanent entity in November 1950 (CIA support, under a new project name, had already been approved by OPC's Project Review Board). Josselson swallowed his pride and went along, resigning his job with the American occupation government to become the Congress's Administrative Secretary for the next 16 years.