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Cultural skirmishes of the Cold War

The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War
By David Caute
Oxford University, 788 pp., **$39.95**

By John H. Summers

Joseph Stalin loved to watch movies. He used to take his daughter, Svetlana, to his private screening room in the Kremlin, where they would admire Tarzan flicks until the wee hours of the morning.

Johnny Weissmuller made a captivating leading man, but Stalin brooked no competitors to his favorite screen presence: himself. As David Caute explains in "The Dancer Defects," Soviet directors indulged Stalin under the threat of severe penalties. Once, a young director was invited into that screening room to show a new production. Stalin sat in the back, alone in his row of seats.

The director, placed in the front row, listened fearfully for any sign of displeasure at his rear. At one point the dictator's secretary delivered a dispatch, prompting him to exclaim, "What's this rubbish?" The director, believing that this was Stalin's judgment on his film, soiled his pants, fainted, and fell to the floor. Guards carried him away.

The plight of the young director, trapped between culture and power, embodied the situation of Soviet intellectuals in the Stalinist regime. Yet something more than the monomania of a brute explains the pressure of that moment, according to Caute. Soviet cinema then occupied one flank of the broad cultural war against the United States. On the superiority of Soviet film hinged the fate of communist society.

Although the Soviets found they could not compete against American cinema, they did win other cultural skirmishes, in chess, theater, and space technology.

These battles form the subject of Caute's marvelous book. As he says, the cultural war between the Soviets and the Americans had no precedent in human affairs. He argues that the United States prevailed over the Soviet Union for moral and intellectual reasons as well as economic and military ones. In contrast to the Americans, Soviet elites could not persuade their people to believe in their society.

This is not a new argument, but the form it takes here is striking for its depth, diversity, and rigor. Caute shows that elites on both sides formally valued racial and sexual equality, universal literacy, individualism, technological progress, economic prosperity, and public health. The rivalry presupposed a common structure of values arising out of the Enlightenment.

The war generated paradoxes aplenty. For example, Soviet political elites staged Elizabethan and Greek dramas to demonstrate their commitment to "humanist" culture. Yet they locked up one of every 20 of their citizens in the gulag. American political elites promoted modernist art and literature to demonstrate their commitment to free experimentalism. Yet almost nobody in the government could understand modernist aesthetics, and Senator Joseph McCarthy and his thugs persecuted anything that smacked of the free public culture of the Roosevelt years. Both sides forced dissenters to undergo public repentance. These rituals helped develop a newly global audience.

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Caute, accordingly, compasses the cultural Cold War not only in the Soviet Union and the United States, but also in the battlegrounds of England, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. He works in multiple languages, satisfies the special demands of theater, cinema, music, ballet, and art, and follows the trail in newspapers, concert halls, exhibitions, and on television. If the highest compliment to pay a scholar is to say that he is equal to his subject, then let Caute enjoy the honor.

It is too bad, then, that he picks a fight with "leftist social critics." In a needlessly polemical conclusion, he maintains that such critics, in their eagerness to condemn the United States, underestimate the realities of international power politics, that is, of the need to fight communism. Relieved from this burden, they obsess over the growth of the national security state in the United States and bewail the secretive means by which it funded cultural expression in the 1940s and 1950s. The history of culture, so understood, fails to rise above an investigation into links between a promotional state and compliant intellectuals. With luck, "The Dancer Defects" will remind historians that understanding ideas means more than exposing the political attitudes they serve.

But for this same reason, leftist historians deserve better consideration. At their best, they have tried to maintain a position that simultaneously applauds the demise of Stalin's screening room and deplores the domestic consequences of the Cold War. This position is layered with traps, but from its sense of doubleness leftists have been able to pose two questions.

First, what are the standards according to which culture ought to be judged? The struggle between the Soviets and Americans treated all cultural expression as an implement of war. To be excellent was to be "first" on the scene or to contribute positively to a prior "image" of the nation.

Second, what is the meaning of cultural freedom? Leftists have tried to deepen the concept from the formal absence of political censorship to include the defense of criticism and dissent. In treating McCarthyism as a purely contingent phenomenon, Caute overlooks the greater irony. On the one hand, the expanding bureaucracies needed to prosecute the Cold War served to consolidate, for the first time, a self-conscious class of intellectuals in America. On the other hand, these same conditions diminished their capacity for critical thought and required them to purge their ranks of neutralists and heretics who betrayed the prefabricated rituals of dissent. The result has been to deprive later generations of a critical theory of society.

John H. Summers teaches social studies at Harvard.

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