

## *Finks*

### *How the CIA tricked the World's Best Writers*

Joel Whitney

London and New York: O/R Books, 2016 <sup>1</sup>

paperback, 328 pages, bibliography, notes, index

**W**hitney had the bright idea of exploring some of the activities of the CIA's Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) in the 1950s and 60s by showing how the CCF used and tried to manipulate people who became famous writers. Some of this will be familiar if you have been following the continuing exposure of the activities of the CCF<sup>2</sup> but there is a good deal which was new to me. *The Paris Review* looms large again, and though there is little of substance about it that hasn't been discussed before<sup>3</sup> there is a good deal of new detail. The CIA's role in getting Pasternak's *Dr Zhivago* published in the West is described; as is the Agency's encounter in Paris with Richard Wright and James Baldwin. They were both initially promoted by the CIA until they noticed that the Agency's people were only interested in their criticisms of the Soviet Union and not in their views on racism in America. Ernest Hemingway's paranoia in later life is shown to be rational: he *was* being followed and spied on. And there is a very funny account of the manic depressive poet Robert Lowell, off his meds and off his head, on a tour of Argentina.

The (to me) new material concerns CCF operations in India – a relatively short section which includes the British journalist Phillip Knightley unwittingly working for a CIA-funded

<sup>1</sup> Available at <[http://www.orbooks.com/catalog/finks-by-joel-whitney/?utm\\_source=Lobster&utm\\_campaign=Finks&utm\\_medium=review](http://www.orbooks.com/catalog/finks-by-joel-whitney/?utm_source=Lobster&utm_campaign=Finks&utm_medium=review)>.

<sup>2</sup> Most notably Francis Stonor Saunders' *Who Paid the Piper?* (London: Granta, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> For example in the two essays in *Lobster* by Richard Cummings, 'The CIA and *The Paris Review*' in *Lobster* 47 and 'The fiction of the state: *The Paris Review* and the invisible world of American letters' in *Lobster* 50, neither of which is cited by Whitney. Both these articles are behind *Lobster's* little paywall (which helps pay for this site) but the latter piece, which conveys the social scene within which the CCF existed in America better than any other account, has been reproduced intact – without permission or attribution, of course – at <<http://smokesignalsmag.com/3/parisreview.html>>.

magazine and later meeting the CIA officer whose operation it was – and a fifty page section on South America. At this point the distinction between psy-ops and covert ops blurs and Whitney intercuts the South American CCF operations – involving, *inter alia*, the young Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and trying to stop Pablo Neruda winning the Nobel prize – with accounts of the Cuban revolution and its impact in South America, subsequent American actions against Cuba, Che's death and the American-sponsored coups in Guatemala and Brazil.

The CIA's people in the literary field believed they were promoting the non-communist left (NCL to use the Agency acronym), and nobbling those deemed to be too comm-symp (such as Neruda), with material aimed at the actual and potentially left-leaning intelligentsia (rather than at those on the right, whose support could be taken for granted). But while George Plimpton – to take the obvious example – was promoting writers he approved of in Europe and America, elsewhere in the world his employers were acting as the global enforcer for American capital and the piles of peasant bodies were growing.

There are only two things which raised my eyebrows. The first is the author's claim that in the summer of 1962 JFK approved the plan to run the coup in Brazil which actually happened in 1964, under LBJ. Whitney cites Tim Weiner's *Legacy of Ashes* (Doubleday, 2007) which shows that JFK was discussing discussing the possibility of allowing a military coup in Brazil and approved spending millions of dollars there to undermine the Brazilian president, Joao Goulart. JFK may indeed have approved the coup plan but the evidence of that final step is not there yet as far as I can see.<sup>4</sup>

The CCF is the main focus of the book but its reach extends way beyond that into other CIA operations: for example, Operation Chaos against the domestic radical media; and, in the final section, 'Coda: Afghanistan', he shows how former CCF personnel were involved in the propaganda around the American support for the mujahideen in

<sup>4</sup> The evidence, transcripts of recordings of JFK and brother Bobby discussing this, is at <<http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB465/>>.

Afghanistan. It is here that the second striking assertion appears. He notes (p. 262) that Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jimmy Carter's, Secretary of State, has admitted that secret US aid to the mujahideen *preceded* the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Whitney thinks this probably triggered that invasion;<sup>5</sup> and since that ultimately gave us Al Qaeda, 9/11 and ISIS, if it did, this must count as the most stupid and self-destructive act by the American state.

Whitney's strategy of hanging an account of CCF operations on that organisation's dealings with people who became famous writers works rather well. He writes nicely – this is not an academic text – the narrative rattles along and it just is interesting to see famous names doing and writing this or that 50, 60 years ago, before the world knew anything about CIA psy-ops. If you are not familiar with the CCF material, this would be a good way into the subject. If you know some of the CCF literature, the sections here on India and South America may well be as new to you as they were to me.

*Robin Ramsay*

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<sup>5</sup> Whitney is probably right.

'An interview in 1988 given by a former Pakistani military official further corroborates this. According to this Pakistani military official, eight months before the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad had asked Pakistani military officials to "to recommend a rebel organization that would make the best use of U.S. aid.'" <<https://web.stanford.edu/class/e297a/Afghanistan,%20the%20United%20States.htm>>