

Genius Dunderheads

My Mark Y. Herring

Double Lives: Spies and Writers in the Secret Soviet War of Ideas Against the West, by Stephen Koch (New York: The Free Press, 1994) x, 419 pages, bibliography, index.

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To the man-in-the-street, who I'm sorry to say,
Is a keen observer of life,
The word "Intellectual" suggests straight away
A man who is untrue to his wife.

If Stephen Koch's book is but one-tenth true, we might add to Auden's lines that the word "intellectual" should also suggest a curmudgeon, a traitor, a *flaneur*, and one with whom you'd never even examine used cars. But the attitude taken by some intellectuals is not unlike those immortal lines penned by C. S. Calverley about Eugene Aram, who, though a thief, a liar, and a murderer, was, nonetheless, an intellectual and therefore "among the noblest of humankind".

Such seems to be the attitude of anyone associated with an institution of, risible as it is to write this, "higher" learning. Intellectuals seem to think of themselves in this wise: whatever we've done to get us in this fix doesn't matter. You're too stupid to understand the "dynamics" of the situation and therefore must be told how important this procedure is and why. Of course you'll never understand it; besides, we know better.

Such antics not only remind us of a certain political leader and his busybody wife, but they also underscore for us why conservative pundit Bill Buckley often said he'd rather be ruled by the first 500 names in the Cambridge phone book than the Harvard faculty. No, this was not just a Yalie talking. It was experience. Intellectuals are smarter than regular folk. They just aren't any wiser when it comes to politics, as Koch's book explains.

Koch is not the first to point this out. Paul Hollander's book, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, 1928-1978* (Oxford University Press, 1981) told the story of numerous Western intellectuals who, when it came to apprising the rest of us of the world situation were as wrong as Riegels. But

gridiron Riegels only ran the wrong way. When intellectuals get it wrong, there are usually a mountain of bodies to bury.

Koch takes readers on the ride of their lives, chronicling the desperate and depressing life of one, Willi Munzenberg. Before Munzenberg ended as do all revolutionaries who are at the heart of the revolution, or even its fringe (e.g., John Reed), Koch reveals the malversations of individuals from sea to shining sea. The machinations are breath-taking; the perfidy hair-raising. In the end, the reader is left wondering if Shakespeare had it all wrong. Leave the lawyers alone; begin with the intellectuals!

Koch's story opens with the sealed train of Lenin at the Finland Station, the same train that Churchill characterized as a "bacillus in a tube". Churchill knew; if only we'd listened! In this tube was spread the disease called Communism. The contagion did not pass from one host to another, but in such ingenious and insidious ways that one is almost led to admire the evilfare.

Karl Radek, Munzenberg's patron and Munzenberg himself, listen as Lenin cavalierly utters what must have been history's greatest understatement—and one of Lenin's more lucid moments: "Six months from now we either will be in power or hanging from the gallows." Unfortunately the gallows had to wait for more than seventy years. What Koch unfolds for us is the willing traitorousness of a Who's Who of intellectuals from France, to Great Britain, to The United States. It did not matter to Communists that these so-called intellectuals could be duped by a blond-bombshell or cards or drink. Only that they were stupid enough to think themselves immune, and thus easy prey.

Second only to these revelations is the mind-numbing one that fascism and communism were hand-in-glove in the Will to Power. Koch argues, and persuasively, that fascism and communism worked off of each other, fascism the dumbshow, the straw-dog for Communism to use only to knock down and then drag every would-be anti-fascist into its fold. It is parismology run amok: Communism allowed the anti-fascist debate to flourish, appeared to take the lead in the debate, beat up the defenseless fascists, and then reaped the benefits.

The Munzenberg story is one of unprecedented power for a nondescript revolutionary. It is also the story of unprecedented fury, when the power begins to evanesce and the monster implodes by eating its young. Radek and Munzenberg were nothing, or nearly so, sitting in that tube. When Lenin won the Revolution, they became among the most powerful men in the world. Later, when Lenin had a change of heart, Munzenberg became the most wanted man in the world. He later became, like Jezebel, another machiavellian revolutionary many centuries earlier, dog meat.

Munzenberg's "reign" lasted only fifteen years, from the Volga Famine in Russia to the Sacco-Vanzetti case in America, to the Spanish Civil War. His job was to maintain the propaganda link between world-wide communication vehicles and the great power. Lenin would later refer to them as "useful idiots". They are the truly great names of the era:

Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Lillian Hellman, Georg Grosz, Erwin Piscator, Andre Malraux, Andre Gide, Bertolt Brecht, Dorothy Parker, Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, the Bloomsberries and others, to name but one dirty dozen.

That Munzenberg did his job, and exceeding well, can be seen from history's own record that among those reporting on the scene, only Malcolm Muggeridge, a fellow-traveller when he began, returned stories detailing the horror that was Communism. Even our own Walter Duranty, *New York Times* reporter-extraordinaire, proved the claue Stalin made him to be.

Munzenberg called these fellow-travelers “innocents” and the function to which he put them and their mush-headed radical chic he dubbed the “Innocents' Clubs”. The phrase, as Koch points out, has more than one meaning. Most of these “useful idiots” could be duped into doing most anything, not only because the “machine” chose to keep them uninformed, but also because they chose themselves to stay ill-informed. As long as you look at the Emperor from the neck up, it's almost easy to forget he's as naked as a jaybird.

The First Congress of the Comintern in 1919 proved nothing more than a ragtag group of delegates. It is unnerving to look back at what history recorded as a laughable event, and then remember what history later showed to be a

From Double Lives

It is quite true that once a fashionable opinion was properly launched, it would quite spontaneously develop and grow among the ranks of enlightened people. Gibarti is said to have called this ripple effect in cultural politics “rabbit breeding”. But the original instigation of that fashion, its placement among the leaders of cultural politics—this was the province of professionals.

All this of course had to be secret and denied. Besides the public charade, there was the deeper matter of managing what we might call the denial within. Every device of vanity and venality, misused trust and intellectual obfuscation was employed. But there was something more. The fellow travellers needed to believe too that their Stalinism was an indispensable part of their own integrity, a key to the working of their intelligence, and to the practice of their arts. They needed to believe. In order for this to happen, the apparatus had to seize on the most salient moral claims of the adversary culture from which almost all these people emerged, and make it theirs. If Americans in the adversary culture understood that the oppression of blacks was the society's great institutionalized crime, Stalinism would take the highest of high ground on the “Negro question”. No matter that Stalin ruled a country where a significant part of the population languished in slave labor camps. If the English adversary culture saw philistinism and middle-class repression as the enemy, Stalinism would embrace iconoclastic taste and sexual liberty as nobody else did; the Bohemianism and flamboyant homosexuality of Guy Burgess were an indispensable part of his slick Stalinism and central to his place in Bloomsbury. No matter that Soviet sexual policy and taste were intolerant to a degree that made Colonel Blimp look liberated. (p. 20)

devastating one. But Lenin wanted nothing flamboyant in the beginning. He was building a Potemkin movement as much as his predecessors built the village. Lenin made pronouncements to that Congress, and to succeeding ones, that were non-existent. Little did we know this habit to be central to his ruling power: reality mattered very little; just make things up as you want them to be and cover the rest with generous amounts of dirt or, as was often the case with this political ideology, below-room temperature bodies.

One of Koch's chapters sums up for the reader the mentality of those who were sucked into this nefarious system: "Lying for the Truth". That so many fellow-travellers could have fallen for that line serves to underscore what dupes they were. What pains the anti-communist to read, however, is the number of bodies it took to get the Communist regime to the point where it could falter under Ronald Reagan's pressure. Every year we commemorate the Holocaust, as well we should. But Lenin and Stalin make Hitler's work look like first-grade genocide, outstripping him in numbers by three-fold.

Munzenberg, himself hardly an intellectual, knew exactly what to do to lure intellectuals into his fold. Bookstores abound in this book, with intellectuals scurrying to them like ants to honey. In the back, like some looming spider waiting for the moth to catch itself in the web, stood Munzenberg waiting to strike. When he did, it left his intellectuals writing praise-worthy accounts of collectives or singing a paean to the workers' movement. On the other hand, if they refused to do either, he simply entombed them in web and stung them, in some case, literally to death. No wonder Luther, or so it is often attributed to him, said "the intellect is the devil's whore".

Munzenberg often took "famous" intellectuals and controlled them with group psychology or bribery. He made them feel entirely independent, so completely in fact that they would rarely exercise their putative freedom. Writers like Lincoln Steffens, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos and Henirich Mann were so well-manipulated that they often never realized it until much too late. By then, their own personal vanity made it impossible to admit to having been so easily and craftily duped—especially by a man who was obviously their intellectual dwarf.

One of the most interesting stories in the book is Munzenberg's launching of the "Sacco-Vanzetti idea". That campaign didn't begin when the case did, but was later latched onto by Munzenberg as a way of drawing more useful idiots into the fold. In 1926 the American Communist Party (acp) stood in disarray, without focus and on the brink of extinction. Munzenberg saw the need for two things: an anti-American cause, and an animating spirit for the acp. The Sacco-Vanzetti case supplied both. The story fell out in this manner. Two Italian immigrant anarchists were charged with stealing the payroll of the Braintree, Massachusetts shoe factory, murdering its paymaster and his guard. Both men were tried in 1921, found guilty and sentenced to death. The case interested no one at the time. A socialist newsman put it this way: "[T]here's no story in it.... Just a couple of wops in a jam."

The idea was to bring the anarchist ideology to the foreground just before the two men

were freed. But on the way to the press conference, the two men were found guilty, and the cause given a black eye. Enter Fred Moore, a brilliant lawyer of the American Left and heavy cocaine user. Carlo Tresca, the doyen of Italo-American radicalism, recommended him to the case. Moore, using every conceivable ploy to get the two men off, single-handedly raised the political argument of the case: powerless, despised men subjected to over-bearing nativist, red-baiting American jurisprudence. Moore wanted to martyr them in order to free them.

Moore made up the case as he went along, creating an ingenious mythology, according to Koch, for all the world to see. But he sincerely believed their innocence—for a while. The evidence showed, however, that Sacco had murdered the guard while the guard begged for his life on his knees. Vanzetti was probably innocent of the robbery, though he knew of it and Sacco's participation. Vanzetti, had he told the truth, would have been freed. Sacco, had he proven a decent human being, could also have freed Vanzetti. But neither budged. So Vanzetti died for propaganda, Sacco for murder.

Moore learned the truth and was dismissed by Sacco. The case began a long caducity of both interest and publicity. With the newspapers having now dropped wire service of the story, Munzenberg picked it up in 1925 and ordered an American branch of the Red Aid called the International Labor Defense, to the “rescue”. Its first mission was to make the Sacco-Vanzetti case into a world-wide myth.

It almost worked, of course, but it was never intended to actually free the immigrants. Katherine Anne Porter, one of the deathwatch reporters, said to Rosa Baron, a Comintern agent, how she hoped Sacco and Vanzetti would finally be saved. Baron replied, “Saved? Who wants them saved? What earthly good would they do us alive?”

But this is only one story early in the book. From here readers are taken through Marion Frankfurter's, Felix Frankfurter's wife and Harvard law professor, duping by operative Gardner Jackson. Readers may also remember Felix Frankfurter as one of this century's most influential Supreme Court Justices. After reaching Marion, Jackson collared Felix. The Frankfurters were made mutually useful to the “cause”. Felix's *tour de force* proved to be one of his best polemical bits of writing, published in the *Atlantic*. He derided the Sacco-Vanzetti case as America at its worst. The piece thrilled Munzenberg. He had it reprinted throughout the world and none other than H.G. Wells summarized it for Britain. The combination proved powerful, and mass hysteria ensued over the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Following this are wars, rumors or wars, revolutions, failed and otherwise, and general global upheaval, all initiated or blessed by Munzenberg. Along the way names like Malraux, Gide, Chambers, Hiss, (Claud) Cockburn and others are picked up and used when helpful.

Second only to the *trahisons des clerics* is the anti-fascist ploy used by Munzenberg to provide a cover for Communist undoings. Munzenberg used to like to brag before the closed inner circle that the Nazi party was part and parcel of the Communist one: “Brown on the outside. Red on the inside.”

Stalin's "anti-fascist" campaign became merely a cover of the first of several deals with Hitler and the Nazi government. It also helped to shield Stalin's own purges of his government. Hitler's denouncement of German Communists Stalin took as "a matter of politics". He never intended to break with Hitler; indeed, he sought an alliance. The Great Terror Stalin thought necessary, even though those scheduled for murder had already been bypassed insofar as power was concerned. Stalin killed them because he could not rule otherwise. When the Republicans lost the 1994 elections, no one feared them deposed any more than we fear Democrats as murderers. But Stalin wanted to show his people that if the true sectators among them, the undyingly faithful to the Party, were murdered, what of those less faithful?

Stalin used the Gestapo to discredit and remove Tuchachevsky and the Red Army general staff, while Hitler used the Comintern and Munzenberg to discredit and eliminate Ernst Rohm and the SA. This process Koch calls "the deal" and the cover used to perform it was anti-fascism. Koch calls it a usurpation of life and liberty on two counts. One, it betrayed all of those enlisted in the anti-fascist struggle because there never was an anti-fascist campaign. Two, it led to the Second World War.

Willi Munzenberg went from being a nameless and power-hungry nothing, to, perhaps, the second or third most powerful man in the world. The end result for him was, of course, death. When hunters found his badly decomposed body in 1940 on 22 October, the stench was awful. His face held the popped-eyed stare of strangulation. He died for his cause. And the bad he did lived on long after his bones returned to dust.

The upshot of *Double Lives* is simply this: America's premier intellectual crop had been duped by some of the most ignorant men alive. Their minds were used to bring about the most perfidious chapter in all of history: the rise of one of the most bloodthirsty regimes of all time; the near-execution of one race; and one of the bloodiest wars on record. All the while, America's journalists, intellectuals, literary figures and other luminaries lied, cheated, perverted the truth, and propagandized their way to the death of millions. What is especially grating is that they did it with an air of moral superiority, telling us it was for our own good.

Koch's book represents a treatise that if true only in part, will require every history teacher in America to change his or her teaching of this epoch. To see the Communist propaganda machine for what it was, is to see history shaped for what it became: one damn thing after another. Everyone knows that ideas have consequences; what they forget is that they can also have gas chambers and gulags. Of course modern intellectuals will never take the book seriously, much less read it. But for those who care what happened and why, Koch's book must become required reading. It is the only way we will ever remember that we must never, never forget.