

Walter L Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 283 pp., ISBN 0-312-17680-5, paper; \$17.95.

Historian Walter L. Hixson, author of a study of cold war diplomat and ideologue George F. Kennan, argues in this book that information and culture played a decisive role in bringing down the Soviet Union and its satellites. 'Infiltration' – Hixson curiously insists on keeping the cold-war term – of American ideology and culture into the USSR and Eastern Europe during the Cold War has been neglected by traditional diplomatic histories of the Cold War, he suggests. Hixson acknowledges that such comparative neglect of the

contribution of American culture to the collapse of Soviet communism reflects the fact that State Department diplomats and functionaries took a dim view of the political significance of cultural contacts with the Soviet Union during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. The maintenance of the economic and military superiority of the United States was the primary objective and all dealings with the Soviets should proceed on the basis that the Soviets understood and accepted that fact.

Propaganda conducted especially by radio grew out of war-time experience, when it was known as 'psychological warfare.' The outgoing Truman administration had requisitioned a report from MIT and Harvard on how to 'wage total cold war.' Appropriately entitled 'Project Troy,' this collaboration between the elite universities and the national security bureaucracy was seen as exemplary by State Department officials. On the basis of the scholarly recommendations a Psychology Strategy Board was set up in 1951 with the task of uniting the national security bureaucracy in a campaign of psychological warfare. The Board, manned by personnel from the State Department, Central Intelligence Agency, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was to submit recommendations to the National Security Council. The underlying assumption of 'psychological warfare' strategies was that the peoples of Eastern Europe were discontented with Soviet rule, and the goal was to stir up disaffection and ultimately rebellion against Communist oppression. Anti-Communist propaganda was beamed into the Soviet zone by the Voice of America (VOA), Radio Liberation (RL) and Radio Free Europe (RFE). Each country was targeted separately in its own national language spoken by refugees, escapees and others, often fanatically anti-Communist. Some of the more vulgar and vituperative propaganda was conducted not by VOA but by the Munich-based stations RL and RFE; officially 'private' stations but funded by the CIA and with boards answerable to the State Department.

On Eisenhower's initiative a United States Information Agency (now USIS) was created in 1953. Hixson argues that its creation was somewhat against the wishes of the State Department. However, although the director would report directly to the president and the National Security Council, the new agency would be subject to policy guidance by the State Department. In a classic example of Orwellian Newspeak the mission of the USIA was stated as that of persuading 'foreign peoples that it lies in their own interest to take actions which are also consistent with the national objectives of the United States' (26). The *de facto* subordination of USIA was indicated by its continual complaints about inadequate funding and its submission to demands that it maintain an Index of 'subversive' literature during the height of the McCarthy rampage. Thus USIA libraries were asked to remove such highly esteemed novels as Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, Jones' *From Here to Eternity*, and Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

Hixson's central argument is that aggressive psychological 'warfare' broadcasts were exposed as so much irresponsible hot air in 1956 when both the US and NATO passively stood by as Soviet troops 'drowned the Budapest uprising in blood,' as the headmaster at my school memorably put it to us in his morning address. In Hixson's scenario control over RFE and VOA subsequently tightened, as when the US began to encourage national communism particularly in Poland. The anti-Polish programs of the 'private' RFE radio station were summarily transformed into pro-Gomułka broadcasts. VOA turned to exclusive English-language broadcasts of news and entertainment. Its famous 'Music

USA' program was actually launched as early as 1955. Emceed by Willis Conover, it became one of the most popular VOA programs.'

Hixson wants to document a movement in American cold war propaganda away from strident anti-communist rhetoric towards an emphasis upon the enviable American Way of Life as something that ought to and could be made available to all people in the world once they committed themselves to liberal democracy and a capitalist economy. He attaches particular importance to the American contribution to the 1958 Brussels World Fair, to the 1958 cultural agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union, and to the subsequent American National Exhibition in Moscow the following year. For the Brussels Exhibition Hixson relies on Robert Rydell's *World of Fairs* (1993) as well as archival material containing USIA officials' reports. Hixson argues that in both exhibitions the Americans were anxious to counter Soviet criticism of class exploitation and the disfranchisement of African-Americans. Thus in Brussels the American show was sold as 'People's Capitalism' (in the United States there is only one class: the Middle Class). Hixson deals extensively with the 'American Negro' exhibit, which in his words tried to present the issue of race with 'unprecedented honesty and integrity.' Both the Soviet and European press had circulated the Little Rock, Arkansas images and news of the previous year, and the Americans evidently felt that they could not ignore the issue. Whether the presentation was as courageous as Hixson claims is not clear on the evidence offered here. Perhaps he ascribes 'integrity' to the USIA because this section of the exhibition in particular aroused the anger of Southern congressmen: protests, however, that led the honorable USIA organizers to remove offending photos of 'mixed' couples or groups from the exhibition. The analysis of the US exhibition in 1959 in Moscow that secured the world's headlines because of Nixon and Khrushchev's carefully staged 'kitchen debate' rests on Hixson's own archival research both in the US and Russia. Here the People's Capitalism – the American Way of Life – was translated into an orgy of exhibited consumer goods, 'labor-saving' house appliances, cosmetics and hygienic products and, of course, automobiles. Carefully vetted young Americans served as guides to the various exhibits and personally sifted and fielded questions from the many visitors. Hixson reports USIA officials' self-congratulatory reports on this effective pedagogical strategy. They may well have picked up the idea from the communists. Any visitor to the USSR in those years will recall how hard it was to sneak out or see anything 'unaccompanied.'

Hixson doesn't have much to say about American 'high' culture as propaganda, but mentions in passing that the Americans worried about Soviet criticism of vulgar American mass entertainment (including rock'n'roll). Accordingly both in Brussels and Moscow 'modern' American art (e.g. abstract expressionist painting) was exhibited. There is some indication that the selection of 'modernist' art worried American organizers because of its potentially disturbing effects on the overall impression of the exhibition. Conservative Congressmen and corporate business executives tended to argue that there was little point in spending money on showing America's dirty linen abroad. Rather, they wanted American art which conveyed deep spiritual and national truths. Intermittently, Hixson's book offers fascinating snippets such as the above, the successful tour of Leonard

1. As far as I remember the signature tune of his regular 'Jazz Club USA' was 'Take the A-Train.'

Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic, the earlier impact of the frequently-toured *Porgy and Bess* (presumably because of its large African-American cast), or pianist Van Cliburn's surprising, and apparently cult-like, success. But the thesis of his book, that with better funding and hence more clout the USIA could have even more successfully 'penetrated' the Iron Curtain, and thus, perhaps, have ended the Cold War sooner and more cheaply, is not really persuasive. The USIA comes across as totally subservient to the State Department.

But perhaps this is not what his book is really about. To a great extent, and as his concluding chapters also suggest, he intends a contribution to the rehabilitation of Eisenhower, who is presented as a man of good will and common-sense about how to serve US national interests best – but, unfortunately, also a weak man who let hard-liner Secretary of State John Foster Dulles have his way and who disastrously agreed to one last, fatal, U-2 spy plane flight. In Hixson's scenario Eisenhower blew the chance to go down in history as the statesman who initiated a *détente* between East and West. Isn't this expecting a bit too much from the man who cowardly refused to stop the execution of the Rosenbergs?