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## Cold Warriors of the Book: American Book Programs in the 1950s

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### Abstract

In the early years of the Cold War, programs run by the United States Department of State and, later, the United States Information Agency attempted to provide opinion-makers in foreign nations with books about the U.S. that would counter Soviet propaganda claims. An overview of these programs and of the titles included shows that their portraits of the U.S. mirrored those of Cold War liberals generally: the U.S. was a society not without flaws, but one whose strength came from its democratic system of governance and its valuation of the principles of “freedom,” both political and economic.

# COLD WARRIORS OF THE BOOK



American Book Programs in the 1950s

*Greg Barnhisel*

Beginning in the late 1940s, confronted by a powerful Soviet propaganda effort aimed at discrediting the United States' claims to stand for freedom and opportunity, the U.S. government and the American cultural establishment sought ways to counter that propaganda, and to present the history, culture, and values of the United States to the world in a way that would serve their Cold War policy priorities. Groups as diverse as the State Department and United States Information Agency (USIA), the American Library Association and the American Book Publishers Council, the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Endowment, the Asia Society and the Congress for Cultural Freedom engaged in this project, which brought together the government and the private sector in a full-throated defense of what they dubbed "the Free World." The battles of what became known as the "Cultural Cold War" ranged from heated exchanges at international conferences to dueling theatrical productions to competing literary and cultural journals. It was not all so genteel, of course; the intelligence services of the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union, and the nations of the Eastern bloc all worked in covert or duplicitous ways to make cultural products and events serve political purposes, often without the participants' knowledge or acquiescence.<sup>1</sup> Books became a central weapon in both sides' cultural-propaganda campaigns. The United States made books available to foreign audiences in multiple ways: at American "Information Center" libraries, through a market-based export initiative called the Informational Media Guaranty (IMG) program, through donations of textbooks and scientific publications to foreign schools and aid programs, and through a government-directed project to translate, publish, and sell American books—with their origins disguised—in foreign markets. The books produced and distributed by these programs, aimed at an audience of elite opinion-makers, sought to counter persistent notions abroad that the United States was an anti-intellectual cultural wasteland and to present an image of the United States as a well-meaning liberal democracy whose civil liberties and democratic institutions



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