Playing the CIA’s Tune? The New Leader and the Cultural Cold War*

In his 1987 memoirs Out of Step, Sidney Hook suggested that the importance of the magazine Partisan Review as “the political center of... socialist anti-Stalinist activity in the United States” had been greatly exaggerated. “The real center of political anti-Communist thought and activity,” the philosopher proposed, “was the New Leader, whose editor, Sol Levitas was, until his death, the central figure. His life and work await their scholarly historian.”1 When this claim was challenged in the New York Times Book Review, Hook’s fellow “New York intellectual” Daniel Bell penned a letter to the editor drawing a distinction between the primarily literary Partisan Review, which for much of its existence had appeared quarterly, and the political weekly New Leader, whose “information and reportage” served as “the factual basis for many of the opinions expressed by literary intellectuals.” Younger historians who lacked “a firsthand acquaintance with these events” needed to be aware of the importance of Levitas and his paper.2

It is well over a decade now since this historiographical intervention, yet the scholarly literature on the New Leader (NL), at least when compared with that on the Partisan Review (PR), remains minuscule, confined to passing references in books on other subjects, most recently Frances Stonor Saunders’s impressive account of the CIA’s effort in the “Cultural Cold War”—that is, the struggle

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between the United States and Soviet Union for the ideological allegiance of
the world’s intellectuals—*Who Paid the Piper?* The probable reason for this
relative neglect is the failure of the publication to capture the political im-
agination of leftist intellectual historians searching for a usable radical past.
Compared with the *PR’s* eye-catching blend of independent Marxism and
literary Modernism, the *NL’s* characteristic editorial stance of hard-line anti-
communism combined with liberal reformism appears to offer little in the way
of theoretical or practical inspiration to the Left of today. If this is the case,
then Saunders’s revelation that the weekly was amongst the numerous recipi-
ents of covert funding from the CIA in the Cultural Cold War will hardly have
enhanced its historical reputation. Nor will the implication contained in the
title of her book that the CIA effectively called the tune of those benefiting from
its clandestine patronage.

The aim of this article is not to discover some hitherto undetected leftist
potential in the *New Leader* (although, incidentally, such a project should not
be written off out of hand, given the publication’s consistent support for indus-
trial unionism, antifascism, and anti-anti-Semitism and its advocacy of the civil-
rights movement). Rather, it is to follow Sidney Hook’s lead by investigating
the paper’s function as a center of leftist anticommunism during the period
when its influence was generally agreed to have been at its height, the late 1940s
and early 1950s, and in doing so contest the suggestion that its role in the Cold
War was merely that of a mouthpiece for the American national security estab-
ishment, a “piper” for the CIA. Such an interpretation, it will be argued, over-
looks three important factors. First, it fails to take account of the *NL’s* pre-Cold
War history as a vocal opponent of communism dating as far back as the 1920s.
Second, as is revealed by an analysis of its contents during the early postwar
period, the paper did not merely reflect official attitudes toward communism in

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3. See Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London, 1999), especially 162–64. (Saunders’s book was published in the United States in 2000 under the less provocative title *The Cultural Cold War.*) Two other recent publications that refer to the *New Leader* in passing are Abbot Gleason’s treatise on the discursive career of totalitarianism, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York, 1995), 62–63, and André Liebich’s history of Menshevism, *From the Other Shore: Russian Social Democracy after 1921* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 299–309. The only extended study of the publication of which I am aware is a 1949 Columbia University dissertation by Paul Kessler, “History of the *New Leader*,” held by the Tamiment Library, New York University. I am grateful to Gail Malmgreen for alerting me to the existence of this work.

4. Typical of this perception is Alan M. Wald’s dismissal of the *New Leader* as “a halfway house for right-wing social-democratic anticommunists from which virtually no one returned.” Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1987), 5. Wald’s comment echoes earlier hostile references to the *New Leader* by left-wing members of the New York intellectual community, such as Dwight Macdonald, who described the publication as an “extreme right-wing labor paper, of a low intellectual level.” Macdonald to Victor Serge, 27 February 1945, Dwight Macdonald Papers, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. Similar views were expressed elsewhere by Irving Howe and Mary McCarthy.
the Cold War; if anything, it helped to shape them. Finally, to dismiss the New Leader as a mere functionary of the CIA is to ignore archival evidence of tension and conflict between the publication and its secretive patron.

Although Bell and Hook stressed the differences between the New Leader and the Partisan Review, the early histories of the two publications were strikingly similar. Both began life as the official organs of left-wing organizations, then grew frustrated with the constraints of party patronage, before eventually breaking away and striking out on their own. That said, there was one crucial difference between them: in the case of the New Leader, the organization concerned was the Socialist rather than the Communist party. Indeed, unlike the PR, the NL was anticommunist from the moment of its birth. Launched in New York in January 1924 under the editorship of the staunch midwestern Socialist James Oneal, it routinely denounced the Soviet Union for having betrayed the ideals of true socialism and warned the American Socialist party (SPA) against forming a “united front” with Communists. This line received strong backing from anticommunist New York labor leaders such as David Dubinsky, who regarded the paper as a valuable tool of worker education. It was less popular with the “Militants”—that is, younger, pro-Soviet Socialists who favored a united-front strategy and who, after the onset of the Depression, began challenging the anticommunist “Old Guard” for leadership of the SPA. During the early 1930s, the New Leader was protected from the Militants by the solidly anticommunist New York party organization. In May 1936, however, after having been refused seats at the SPA’s National Convention, the New York Old Guard bolted the party and formed a new organization, the Social Democratic Federation (SDF). The New Leader followed suit shortly afterward, becoming the SDF’s official organ. Although relations with this new sponsor were initially good, tensions soon began to arise over claims by the SDF that the paper’s preoccupation with anticommunism was eroding its positive commitment to democratic socialism. These intensified after Oneal acrimoniously resigned his editorship in 1940 and the remaining editorial staff forged a new alliance with Reinhold Niebuhr’s Union for Democratic Action (UDA), forerunner of the archetypal liberal anticommunist organization, Americans for Democratic


6. The New York Old Guard’s bolt from the SPA is extensively documented in the Bell Papers.

7. Oneal quit the New Leader, claiming that a faction of the publication’s staff, led by Sol Levitas, was seeking to transform it from the organ of the SDF into a mouthpiece for “the liberal intelligentsia.” Oneal, statement to City Central Committee of Local New York, SDF, 5 June 1940, SDF Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York (hereafter SDF papers).
Eventually the *New Leader* severed its ties with the SDF, converting from newspaper to tabloid format at the same time.

The *New Leader*’s movement rightward in this period was largely due to the influence over its editorial policy of its business manager (later executive editor), Samuel M. (Sol) Levitas. A Russian-born social democrat, or “Menshevik,” who had fled the Soviet Union in 1923 disguised in a Red Army colonel’s uniform, Levitas nursed a visceral hatred of communism and an ambition to turn the NL from the mouthpiece of an obscure socialist sect into the leading political organ of the American “Non-Communist Left.” To this end, he courted contributions from a wide variety of anticommunist intellectuals. These included fellow Mensheviks such as Raphael Abramovitch, Boris Nicolaevsky, and David Dallin, who had arrived in New York as members of the “Foreign Delegation” in 1940, and whom Levitas provided with food, shelter, and a place to publish their expert commentaries on communism and the Soviet Union. Levitas also threw the NL’s pages open to prominent American anticommunists from outside the socialist movement, such “names” as Max Eastman, Eugene Lyons, and, of course, Sidney Hook, whose past links with communism might have led one to expect a closer association with the *Partisan Review*, yet who found that magazine too “cultural” for his largely political tastes. Finally, Levitas made a point of nurturing “talent,” up-and-coming young writers with their roots in the socialist and Trotskyist movements, future “New York intellectuals” like Irving Kristol, Melvin J. Lasky, and Daniel Bell, all of whom worked in the NL’s offices during the 1940s and displayed an intense personal loyalty to their Menshevik boss.

For these various intellectuals, the *New Leader* was not only an important publishing outlet; it also served as campaign headquarters in their crusade against communism. Among the numerous anticommunist activities with which Levitas and his paper were identified during the 1930s and early 1940s were: the creation in 1939 of the anti-Stalinist front organization (and precursor of the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom, of which more below), the Committee for Cultural Freedom; the campaign to publicize the mysterious disappearance of Henryk Erlich and Victor Alter, two Polish Bund leaders who had sought refuge from Nazism in the Soviet Union; and the whipping-up of

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8. The SDF officially censured the NL’s relationship with the UDA in a “Report of the Sub-Committee on Relations of the SDF and the *New Leader*,” n.d. (probably September 1942), SDF Papers.


11. Bell, who worked for the paper between 1940 and 1944 as a staff writer and managing editor, recalls contributing four or five items an issue under a variety of pseudonyms, including Andrew Marvell and John Donne. Daniel Bell, interview with author, 13 November 1995, Cambridge, MA. Bell’s loyalty to Levitas had an almost filial quality. See Howard Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism: Social Theory and Political Reconciliation in the 1940s* (Madison, WI, 1986), 149.
protest at the apologetic portrayal of Stalinism contained in the 1943 Warner Brothers production *Mission to Moscow*, a film adaptation of the book of the same title by the former U.S. ambassador to the USSR, Joseph E. Davies, a notorious “fellow traveler.” In other words, Sol Levitas’s *New Leader* was a (to quote Hook again) “center of political anti-Communist thought and activity” long before the start of the Cold War—or, for that matter, the creation of the CIA.

A second argument that can be made in, as it were, the NL’s defense is prompted by two recent developments in historical scholarship about the Cold War. One of these is the attention historians are increasingly paying to the part played by nongovernmental forces in the anticommunist politics of the Truman-Eisenhower era, both at home (witness, for example, the importance attributed by Ellen Schrecker to private anticommunist networks in the genesis of McCarthyism) and abroad (where, according to such diplomatic historians as Scott Lucas, citizen groups were active across a wide range of U.S. foreign policy initiatives, especially covert operations). The other is the growing interest shown by Cold War scholars in the role of ideology—and, in particular, ideology’s discursive embodiment as *rhetoric*—in shaping American attitudes toward communism during the early stages of the conflict, again on both its domestic and its foreign fronts. As private citizens who specialized in the creation of anticommunist ideas and language, the intellectuals associated with the *New Leader* might be viewed in light of these new concerns as having made a more important contribution to the growth of what might be called “Cold War consciousness” in America than has previously been supposed. At the very least, an examination of the NL’s international coverage during the late 1940s and 1950s reveals the publication as engaged in a massive intellectual effort to construct communism as a threat to American national survival.

A good starting point for such an analysis is intellectual historian Abbot Gleason’s suggestion that the *New Leader* was instrumental in introducing the term “totalitarian” into American discourse about the Soviet Union. It is possible to detect three rhetorical techniques at work here. The first and most obvious was the paper’s constant privileging of the “expert” commentary on

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Soviet affairs of its Menshevik contributors, all of whom subscribed to the view that Communist Russia was totalitarian.\(^\text{16}\) One leading Menshevik, Solomon Schwarz, deployed detailed statistical evidence to build up a grimly convincing picture of the Soviet “command” economy. Another, Boris Nicolaevsky, working from the assumption that in a totalitarian society the only potential for political change existed at the leadership level, provided minute analyses of power struggles in the Politburo, in the process pioneering the new discipline of “Kremlinology.” Finally, “the ultimate Menshevik pundit,”\(^\text{17}\) David Dallin—throughout this period an associate editor of and weekly columnist in the paper—provided his American readers with their first terrifying glimpse inside the Gulag in such pieces as his 1947 “World Events” pamphlet, “Concentration Camps in Soviet Russia.”\(^\text{18}\)

In exposing the scandal of forced labor in the Soviet Union, Dallin furnished the U.S. government with a useful propaganda weapon in the Cold War and, no less importantly, helped establish the Gulag as the dominant symbol of communist totalitarianism in the American imagination. “The forced labor camp,” explained non-Menshevik Sovietologist Bertram D. Wolfe in the NL, “is an enormous concave mirror reflecting and magnifying . . . the totalitarian society of which it is the product.”\(^\text{19}\) The actual or metaphorical captivity of communist subjects—which was often contrasted, both implicitly and explicitly, with the voluntary associationalism of American citizens—was a constant theme in the Cold War New Leader. The terrible testimony of incarcerated dissidents who had managed to escape to the free West, the rhetorical trope of slavery, with its peculiarly powerful reverberations in an American context (one of which was to associate the U.S. cause in the Cold War with that of the Union in the American Civil War), even allusions to such famous fictional portrayals of political imprisonment as 1984 and Darkness at Noon (a free copy of which was given to every new subscriber)—all featured frequently.\(^\text{20}\)

\(^{16}\) According to André Liebich, the Mensheviks had already contributed to the theoretical development of “totalitarianism” by “inciting the leading German Marxist theoretician, Rudolf Hilferding, to apply the concept . . . to Soviet Russia in 1940, well before such application had become popular.” André Liebich, “Mensheviks Wage the Cold War,” Journal of Contemporary History 30 (1995): 247–64, 258–59. See also Liebich’s Other Shore, 299–309, for more detail on the Mensheviks’ New Leader articles.

\(^{17}\) Liebich, Other Shore, 302.


Third, the *NL* performed important work in promulgating the axiomatic Cold War idea that communism was essentially identical with fascism. This had long been a firm conviction of the editors, who were proud of their record of predicting the Nazi-Soviet Pact in early 1939. However, the notion of “Red Fascism” assumed even greater prominence in the late 1940s and early 1950s, as the *New Leader* struggled to negate the positive perceptions of the Soviet Union current in wartime. Sometimes the concept was expounded at length, as in the *NL* pamphlet “The Brothers Communazi.” At others, it was merely a passing rhetorical flourish—for instance, a throw-away reference to “Generalissimo Stalin.” Whatever form it took, the *NL*’s insistent use of the fascist-communist equation—which must have had an especially poignant resonance for the paper’s large Jewish readership—served as a powerful device in the construction of the Soviet Union as totalitarian.

Of course, in addition to emphasizing the internally oppressive character of the Soviet regime, the concept of Red Fascism also carried strong overtones of external aggressiveness. The *New Leader* had always maintained that Stalin nursed imperialistic ambitions, citing Marxist-Leninist doctrine as proof of Communist Russia’s inherent expansionism. The Soviet annexation of Eastern Europe during the late 1940s, then, came as no surprise to the publication, which nevertheless described the process in highly emotive, often strikingly gendered language, as in this passage from a 1948 column by David Dallin: “The abhorrent spectacle of rape is evolving before our eyes. With her clothes torn, her body lacerated and bleeding, Czechoslovakia’s resistance is fast failing. And the peoples of the world, like a bunch of demoralized soldiers, stand aside and watch the crime—with horrified interest but no action.” As this excerpt clearly implies, it was less Soviet rapaciousness per se than the tacit complicity of other countries that enraged the *NL* writers. European democracies such as France were denounced for their reluctance to engage in the defense of the continent. The lack of resolution of the United Nations was another cause of complaint.

It was the United States, though, that came in for the harshest criticism from the *New Leader*. Here the Nazi-Soviet equation came into play again. The United States, it was constantly stated, was guilty of the same sort of appeasement that had permitted Hitler a free hand in Europe during the 1930s and led

22. The notion of “Red Fascism” could even acquire visual form. See, for example, cartoon, *The New Leader*, 5 June 1948: 4.
23. The *NL* made particular efforts to refute what it regarded as the myth of Soviet philo-Semitism. See, for example, Jacob Pat, “The Fate of the Jews in the Soviet Union,” *The New Leader*, 3 May 1947: 9.
directly to World War II. William Henry Chamberlin, whose weekly column “Where the News Ends” set the overall tone of the NL’s international coverage as much as did Dallin’s contributions, was especially vociferous on this point. The outcome of the Yalta conference was a source of particular vexation for Chamberlin. The date of the Yalta Agreement should, he proposed, be commemorated “as a day of national shame and mourning.”

In order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the thirties—“Munich-applied-to-Moscow”—and avert a third world war, the United States must adopt a “bold, clear, and firm” policy of resistance to Soviet expansion. Signs that the Truman administration was doing just that in 1947 were greeted by the NL as welcome but long overdue. “The Right Note at Last,” was Chamberlin’s verdict on the Truman Doctrine. However, reservations about official determination to combat communism remained—“Appeasement is a Lively Corpse,” announced Melvin Lasky in August 1947—and opinion in the New Leader about the Cold War continued to move ahead of that in government circles, with the paper urging an escalation of the United States’ “psychological warfare” effort, and the abandonment of containment in favor of liberation, long before either of these policies received any official backing, at least in public.

Another pivotal Cold War idea to which the New Leader gave currency was the notion of communism as a monolithic, Soviet-led world movement. This conviction, which, like the view of Stalinist Russia as totalitarian and expansionist, predated the Cold War, blinded the NL writers to divisions and conflicts within the Communist bloc. Titoist Yugoslavia, for example, was perceived as a “Soviet satellite,” and Tito himself as “the Stalin of the Balkans.” Similarly, Dallin constantly described the Chinese Communist party as a puppet of Moscow and criticized both State Department officials and prominent columnists Joseph and Stewart Alsop for suggesting otherwise. “It is hard for Americans to understand the true relations of the master-planet and its satellites,” explained Dallin.

It is hard because only those who have seen it first-hand can appreciate the tremendous pressure exerted by a great industrial and military power upon its weak neighbor. And there is a constant radiation of power from the Asian borders of Russia—a radiation of plans, a radiation of orders, a radiation of

will. Day after day, these rays penetrate deeper and farther, engulf new provinces, embrace new groups of people and consolidate the “monolithic bloc.”

Given this remorseless logic, it was not surprising that the New Leader should have taken a very hard line on the Korean War. “If the Soviet Union is allowed to disturb the peace in Korea,” proclaimed an editorial in July 1950, extending the appeasement metaphor to the Far East, “it will proceed with impunity to initiate new aggressive moves—as Hitler did in similar circumstances.” Soon Dallin was urging that North as well as South Korea be liberated from communism, a move that might lead to a democratic revolt in China. The increasingly conservative Chamberlin even suggested “outfitting Chiang Kai-Shek’s troops for a resumption of the struggle on the mainland and systematic, all-out bombing of every military industrial installation in China.” As this last comment suggests, the New Leader was none too choosy about its allies in the Cold War: the homogenization of all communist movements into a single, undifferentiated entity was accompanied by a similar typing of all anticommunists, regardless of their other political beliefs, as defenders of “the free world.” Hence the publication’s championing of the nationalist Jiang Jieshi in China and its near sanctification of the partisan Draza Mihailovich in Yugoslavia. In time, even Tito himself was grudgingly recognized as a potential ally against the Soviet Union.

This is not to say that the New Leader’s international coverage in the early Cold War period utterly lacked complexity or nuance. Contributors did occasionally remark on causes of communist insurgency other than Soviet influence; both Stalin’s death and the “de-Stalinization crisis” caused the publication’s Soviet experts to acknowledge the possibility of internal change in Communist Russia; and the residual traces of fascism in Franco’s Spain and Peron’s Argentina were denounced no less loudly than communism (true to their convictions about the monolithic character of totalitarianism, the editors even

speculated that Stalin would forge a new axis with Franco and Peron). It should also be pointed out that the New Leader often linked its anticommunist stance abroad with its advocacy of liberal causes at home, using the Cold War as a lever for advancing its domestic reform agenda. In 1946, for example, Liston M. Oak argued that antilabor legislation would aid the Soviet cause by sowing class division in American society. In a similar vein, William Gordon welcomed the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown decision as “a most damaging blow against communism.” The publication itself, then, was not entirely univocal or “monolithic” on the Cold War: such contents existed alongside its more extreme anticommunist pronouncements, exposing them to a kind of ongoing internal critique. That said, its editorial voice, heard in features such as the regular columns by Dallin and Chamberlin, was remarkably consistent, even monotonous. Soviet society was totalitarian; Stalin was an imperialist; and communism everywhere was controlled by the Kremlin. For all the “inside knowledge” of its contributors and geographical range of its coverage, the basic tendency of the New Leader’s foreign reportage in the late 1940s and early 1950s was toward simplification. Its peculiar achievement, perhaps, was to provide an apparently authoritative, “expert” Cold War reading of the postwar international order.

The New Leader’s reputation for Cold War expertise was not confined to the international sphere. Like the private network of anticommunist activists portrayed by Schrecker, writers on the paper had been battling communist influence domestically for years before the start of the Cold War. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, for example, New York journalist Victor Reisel had used his “Heard on the Left” column to attack suspected Communists in the U.S. labor movement, such as West Coast longshoreman leader Harry Bridges and Mike Quill of the Transport Workers Union. Come the postwar period, another regular department, “Alert!,” carried on the crusade in the unions—for instance, exhorting the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) leadership to purge Communists in the organization’s ranks—but carried the fight to

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38. For Dallin’s thoughts on Stalin’s death, see his “New Deal in Moscow?,” The New Leader, 27 April 1953: 6–7. For a statement of the NL’s long-standing opposition to Franco, see editorial, The New Leader, 6 May 1950: 30–31. See also Robert J. Alexander’s several articles about Peronismo—for example, “Peron and Argentine Labor,” The New Leader, 11 January 1947: 9.


40. This department’s full title was, “Alert! Dedicated to an Exposé of All Totalitarian Enemies of Democracy.” Although most of its coverage was given over to communism, it did also devote attention to racist and antilabor groups and individuals.

many other areas of society as well, such as the African-American community, the literary intelligentsia, and the media. To cite just one example, it waged a relentless campaign of exposure against Johannes Steel, a New York radio broadcaster suspected of having communist sympathies, until he was forced off the air by station WHN in December 1946.

Such individuals, the NL claimed, not only contaminated the institutions they had infiltrated with their hateful ideology; in the context of the rapidly escalating Cold War, they constituted a domestic “Fifth Column” in the service of a hostile foreign power. Nor did it matter that there were apparently so few of them: as German-born journalist Norbert Muhlen explained in a special New Leader “World Events” pamphlet about the U.S. communist movement, Lenin himself had decreed that revolution was to be accomplished by small cadres of “professional revolutionaries.” Muhlen’s assumption that the intentions of American Communists could be inferred directly from Marxist-Leninist texts was mirrored elsewhere in the NL’s pages by extensive references to such revolutionary “blueprints” as J. Peters’s notorious Manual on Organization, published in 1935 (and later used in the Smith Act trials of U.S. Communist leaders). Hence, in addition to the important business of exposing individual Communists, the New Leader also contributed to the intellectual construction of what Schrecker has called a “demonized image” of the American communist movement as a whole.

Another reason why the New Leader saw no cause for complacency in the relatively small size of the American Communist party was the existence around it of a vast penumbra—what Muhlen, again quoting Lenin, referred to as a “solar system”—of sympathetic individuals and organizations. The fellow traveler, or “Commibut” (“I’m not a Communist, but…”), was perhaps the most despised of all figures in the NL’s Cold War demonology. Joseph Davies, author of Mission to Moscow (or “Submission to Moscow,” as Muhlen joked) remained

42. See, for example, George S. Schuyler, “Reds Outwit NAACP in Drive to Capture Negro Leadership,” The New Leader, 10 August 1946: 5; Raymond Howard, “American Writers Refuse to Don AAA Uniform,” The New Leader, 21 September 1946: 5; Norbert Muhlen, “Fellow-Traveler by Air: Johannes Steel,” The New Leader, 9 February 1946: 5.

43. Norbert Muhlen, “Exit Johannes Steel,” The New Leader, 28 December 1946: 4. The similarity of their names invites speculation that the fictional character of Iron Rinn, the blacklisted radio actor in Philip Roth’s novel I Married a Communist (New York, 1998) is at least partly based on Steel.


46. Schrecker, Many Are the Crimes, 120.

a favorite polemical target. Others included political weeklies “enamored of the false utopia portrayed by Communists”—the Nation, New Republic, and PM (short for “Pravda Minor,” according to William Henry Chamberlin). Above all, though, it was Henry Wallace, America’s most distinguished advocate of peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union, who excited the NL’s wrath. During the run-up to the presidential election of 1948, in which the former vice president stood as candidate of the Progressive party, the paper’s office became a leading center of anti-Wallace activism, publicizing the pronouncements of rival liberal organization Americans for Democratic Action, denouncing Wallace when he was on a speaking tour of Britain in a cable to the British foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, and, just before voters went to the polls, printing a statement by the doyen of American liberalism, John Dewey, alleging that the Progressive party had “its deepest roots in the sub-soil of Soviet totalitarianism.” As this last quotation suggests, the campaign against Wallace was highly vituperative, with the New Leader deploying every rhetorical weapon in its Cold War arsenal to ensure his defeat. Conjuring the Munich analogy, it charged him with “appeasement”; his personal behavior was described, in the newly fashionable psychological parlance of the day, as “irrational,” while his supporters were dismissed, in less clinical language, “as so many crackpots and screwballs”; finally, the common Cold War metaphor of puppetry was invoked to portray the Progressive party as a “Stalinite fifth column” in which sinister Communists pulled the strings of liberal “marionettes.”

In the event, of course, Wallace received only about a million votes, and America was spared having a Commiebut in the White House. However, this did not remove the danger of communism in federal government. The New Leader had commented on the unmasking of the Canadian spy ring in 1946 with grim humor (“Here was Stalin caught with his NKVD down”), and the following year printed defector Igor Gouzenko’s shocking testimony in the case as a series of articles. Throughout the late 1940s, it urged greater vigilance on
the U.S. government, welcoming the Federal Employee Loyalty Program with the same sort of “better late than never” attitude with which it had greeted the Truman Doctrine. In 1949, it even carried an essay by no less an authority on espionage than Allen W. Dulles claiming that America was “the subject of a systematic program of penetration by skilled artisans of world revolution” and calling for the creation of a new internal security commission. A particular preoccupation of the paper, consistent with its hard line on China, was the political allegiance of such State Department advisers on Asian matters as Owen Lattimore and John Stewart Service. Its pronouncements on this issue, especially those delivered by Ferdinand Lundberg, Ralph de Toledano, and Eugene Lyons, verged on the hysterical. Indeed, Lyons was probably only half-joking when, in an NL article entitled “In Defense of Red-Baiting,” he proposed the formation of a new organization to be called “Red-Baiters, Inc.”

Considering this sort of comment, it is not surprising that some historians—including, most recently, Abbot Gleason—have assumed that the New Leader was a supporter of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy. Such a judgment, though, is too harsh. It overlooks criticism by the publication of what it viewed as overzealous anticommunist measures, such as the McCarran Internal Security Act (“an appalling monument to panic and ignorance”) or the firing of a legless war veteran from a U.S. government job because of his past membership in a Trotskyist organization (“Justice Department travesty”). It also fails to take into account the fact that, as McCarthyism took hold in the early 1950s, the NL devoted less and less space to the exposure of domestic communism. Indeed, a common feature of the paper in this period was explicit criticism of McCarthy himself. Granville Hicks, the paper’s literary editor during this period, was particularly forthright in this respect, proclaiming in May 1950, for example, that “the discrediting of McCarthy...is something to be as devoutly desired as the discovery of a cure for the common cold.” Other members of the editorial board shared this view, locating the Wisconsin senator in a dishonorable American tradition of “rabble-rousing demagogues” that included such liberal hate-figures as Theodore G. Bilbo and Gerald L. K. Smith. This is not to say, however, that they rejected the premises of the Cold War Red Scare: guilt by
association, American Communists’ culpability for foreign policy setbacks, and so on. Moreover, they tended to oppose McCarthy on the grounds that he was damaging the American Cold War effort—witness their complaints that his attack on the Voice of America had harmed the United States’ psychological warfare capability—rather than out of any tenderness for the civil liberties of his victims. Indeed, Hicks’s full-frontal opposition to McCarthyism sometimes drew criticism from other NL writers, such as Eugene Lyons, who believed that domestic communism was a greater threat to the freedom of American citizens than excessive anticommunism. In sum, it would probably be fairest to say that, as private “Red-Baiter” Alfred Kohlberg suggested in an angry letter to the editors, the New Leader was confused about McCarthyism. In this regard, it perhaps merely reflected the attitude of the American Non-Communist Left (NCL) as a whole.

Despite the contradictions in its stance on the McCarthy question, the New Leader enjoyed a growing reputation for anticommunist expertise in this period, not only on the NCL but also amongst elite U.S. government officials in Washington, especially those responsible for planning and implementing Cold War covert operations. George F. Kennan, for example, considered Nicolaevsky “an expert on Soviet Russia and consulted him in important matters related thereto.” Chamberlin was similarly valued for his knowledge of Soviet history (if not his strategic advice): “The Russian revolution and civil war have had no finer historian in this country than yourself,” Kennan once told him. Another influential admirer of the New Leader was Time-Life vice president and Dwight D. Eisenhower’s principal adviser on psychological warfare, C. D. Jackson, who reckoned it to be “virtually the only...pro-American, high-quality, left-wing literature that exists on either side of the Atlantic.” In 1953, Jackson arranged an annual Time grant of U.S.$5,000 to the magazine in return for “Research Data” on the international communist movement; he also recommended that Sol Levitas serve as one of the small number of civilian witnesses called to testify before the President’s Committee on International Information Activities (better known as the Jackson Committee), whose report furnished the basis of the Eisenhower administration’s subsequent Cold War propaganda effort.

62. See the exchange between Hicks and Lyons in the letters column, The New Leader, 27 April 1953: 27–29.
64. FBI file on Nicolaevsky, quoted in Liebich, Other Shore, 312.
gence (and, as already noted, New Leader contributor in 1949), consulted with Levitas and Chamberlin on a number of occasions. “I know the publication well and think highly of it,” he told former CIA officer Franklin A. Lindsay in 1956. Other prominent American citizens friendly toward the publication—or at least prepared to donate money to its publisher, the American Labor Conference on International Affairs—including W. Averell Harriman, William J. Donovan, and Frank Altschul.

The New Leader’s value to these individuals did not lie merely in its function as a source of expert, “inside” intelligence about the international communist movement. The publication also offered a potential means of influencing a body of opinion that was deemed to be of crucial strategic significance in the Cold War. When compared with the readership of commercial news magazines such as Time, the NL’s paying audience was tiny: roughly twenty-eight thousand subscriptions in 1955, of which nineteen thousand were individual and the remainder bulk purchases by U.S. unions (this is, incidentally, about three times the PR’s circulation in the same period). However, this audience consisted of precisely those groups on the NCL that the CIA was most concerned to win over in its Cold War struggle for “hearts and minds” with the Soviet Union: that is, literary intellectuals, trade unionists, and socialist politicians. In Britain, for example, the NL enjoyed an excellent profile on the right wing of the Labour party, especially amongst the up-and-coming “Gaitskellite” intellectuals named for the party’s young leader, Hugh Gaitskell. Denis Healey, Labour’s international secretary, served as the magazine’s London correspondent in this period, while Gaitskell himself entertained Levitas at his Hampstead home on several occasions.

As Jackson explained to Dulles, it was not circulation figures that mattered: “The particular tone of voice with which Levitas speaks to a particular group of people here and abroad is unique and uniquely important.”

It was this combination of perceived usefulness in the Cultural Cold War and relatively low sales figures that put the New Leader in line for covert financial assistance from the CIA. The evidence concerning this funding is patchy but conclusive. During the early 1950s, Irving Brown, European representative of the American Federation of Labor and notorious CIA “bag-man,” generated

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68. Allen Dulles to Franklin Lindsay, 20 December 1956, Allen Dulles Papers, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton, NJ.
69. Shepard Stone to Central Files, 8 August 1956, RO 503 Grant No. 56–299, Ford Foundation Papers, New York.
extra revenue and readers for the paper by the simple expedient of arranging for thousands of new European subscriptions to be taken out free of charge. On at least three separate occasions during the same period, Thomas W. Braden, head of the CIA’s International Organizations Division, resorted to the more direct method of personally handing sums of about $10,000 to Levitas. Finally, the National Committee for Free Europe (NCFE), the CIA “front” organization responsible for orchestrating anti-Soviet activities among Eastern European exile groups, paid the NL an annual grant of $25,000. Although this subsidy was cancelled in 1955, additional covert funding was secured thanks to a “Save the New Leader” drive launched by Franklin Lindsay (who spoke of “the one-man psychological warfare job conducted by Levitas”), which by the end of 1956 had netted the paper donations totaling $45,000. These various ploys were intended, as Jackson put it, “for all of us to have our Levitas and let him eat, too.”

Government subventions, then, did have the effect of keeping alive a voice that might otherwise have died out through lack of funding. To that extent, the debate on the Left was manipulated, taking a direction that, if left to itself, might have been different for lack of an articulated perspective like that of the New Leader. However, it does not necessarily follow from this, as many writers about the Cultural Cold War have assumed, that the CIA exercised complete control over its client—or “called the tune,” to adopt Saunders’s musical metaphor. To begin with, the funding was irregular, and, at least in the view of NL insiders, inadequate to the demands of weekly publication. Moreover, rather than being foisted on the paper, it was actively solicited. Braden recalls Levitas “sitting across the table, pleading for money.” Brown was similarly urged to “continue the pressure” and “see that those subscriptions are renewed.” However, Levitas’s most insistent begging was reserved for Michael Josselson, the CIA officer who ran the United States’ principal Cultural Cold War front organization, the Paris-based Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), and who was therefore in charge of a large coffers of agency money. Indeed, the tone of Levitas’s frequent petitions to Josselson grew distinctly querulous, as he accused the CCF of neglecting his paper in favor of other, less deserving causes (including the organization’s own English-language organ, Encounter, which the

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73. Sidney Hook to Irving Brown, 31 October 1951, Irving Brown Papers, George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland (hereafter Brown Papers); Brown to Hook, 3 November 1951, Brown Papers.

74. Saunders, Who Paid the Piper?, 163.


76. Ibid.; Franklin Lindsay to C. D. Jackson, 13 December 1956, Jackson Papers.

77. C. D. Jackson to Allen Dulles, 21 February 1956, Jackson Papers.

78. Saunders, Who Paid the Piper?, 163.

Menshevik viewed as ineffectual in the Cold War). For his part, Josselson became increasingly irritated by Levitas’s recriminations, remarking darkly on “the alarming degree of irresponsibility shown recently by some of our ‘friends’ in New York.” One gets little impression from these exchanges of a puppet-master CIA pulling the strings of a marionette New Leader. The relationship is more reminiscent of that between a cultural patron and a somewhat temperamental artist.

Another source of irritation for Josselson was, ironically, the hardness of the New Leader’s anticommunism. The CCF sought to win foreign intellectuals’ Cold War allegiance, not by pointing out the iniquities of Soviet communism, but rather by advertising the cultural achievements of the free West. This tactical preference, however, was not shared by the CCF’s powerful U.S. affiliate, the American Committee for Cultural Freedom (ACCF), which often loudly accused its parent organization of “soft-pedaling” in the Cold War—much to Josselson’s annoyance. The New Leader was clearly identified with this hard-line tendency. After briefing the CCF’s General Secretary, Nicolas Nabokov, about the extremist anticommunism of the ACCF’s leadership, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., concluded bitterly that “[t]he New Leader variety of ex-Communist is really too much for me.”

(As this comment suggests, relations between the Harvard historian and the NL were distinctly frosty: Schlesinger was unhappy that Levitas had added his name to the telegram sent the British government about Henry Wallace without first consulting him, suspected Chamberlin of harboring fascist sympathies, and in 1953 collaborated with other leading NCL intellectuals in an abortive attempt to launch a new magazine, The Critic, partly in response to what he perceived as the dullness and conformism of publications like the NL. Schlesinger’s linkage of the NL and the ACCF was understandable: the paper and organization shared the same politics, personnel, and even, briefly, offices. It should come as no surprise to learn, therefore, that the NL

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80. See, for example, Levitas to Michael Josselson, 26 January 1954, Congress for Cultural Freedom Papers, Department of Special Collections, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, Illinois (hereafter CCF Papers); Levitas to Brown, 30 November 1954, Brown Papers.


82. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., to Nicolas Nabokov, 18 June 1951, CCF Papers.

83. Levitas to Schlesinger, Jr., to Nicolas Nabokov, 23 January 1947, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Papers, John F. Kennedy Memorial Library, Boston, Massachusetts (hereafter Schlesinger Papers); Levitas to Schlesinger, 27 May 1947, Schlesinger Papers; Schlesinger to Levitas, 28 May 1947, Schlesinger Papers. “There are many excellent things in The New Leader,” wrote Schlesinger in this last letter to Levitas, “but I cannot but feel occasionally that anti-Soviet sentiment by itself is considered a sufficient credential for your writers.” Schlesinger’s collaborators on The Critic included veteran left-wing foes of the NL Dwight Macdonald and Mary McCarthy.

84. Hook, Out of Step, 420. The ACCF shared the NL’s offices at the Rand School for a brief period after it had been established in 1951. Later, when the organization was formally dissolved, the publication was bequeathed half its remaining funds, the other half going to the Partisan Review. Ibid., 426.
was heavily implicated in the ACCF's several rows with Bertrand Russell, which culminated in 1957 with the British philosopher's resignation from his position as honorary chair of the CCF, an event deemed by a furious Josselson to be a major propaganda victory for the Soviets.  

In other words, the New Leader, at least tactically speaking, stood to the right of the main architect of the CIA's Cultural Cold War effort.

A third major problem in the relationship between the CIA and the circle around the NL was the factionalism of the latter. Left-wing politics in New York had always been afflicted by ugly factional feuds, as was demonstrated by the turbulent history of the ACCF, but in the case of the NL this tendency was made even worse by the presence around it of so many Russian émigrés. Although the Mensheviks had by the late 1940s reached agreement on the divisive question of whether the Soviet Union would eventually evolve into a truly socialist society (it would not), the Foreign Delegation was now split (fatally so, it would prove) over another issue, the postwar immigration of anticommunist refugees and defectors from the Eastern bloc countries. As André Liebich shows in his history of Russian social democracy, From the Other Shore, the New York Mensheviks, as “Great Russians” and self-perceived socialists, tended to view these new arrivals—many of whom hailed from “minority nationality” or satellite-state backgrounds and were rabidly anti-Marxist—with a mixture of suspicion and condescension (it is not impossible, by the way, that factors such as these were at play in the strained personal relations between the Russian Levitas and Estonian-born Josselson).  

Liebich goes on to document, using newly available FBI files, the confusion of bureau agents assigned to monitor these various groups, “not really sure to the end” with whom they were dealing.

The CIA, which of course itself had its share of internal ideological divisions, faced similar problems understanding the complexities of émigré politics. The best evidence of this is to be found in the papers of James Burnham, the former Trotskyist and future neoconservative who during the late 1940s acted as a “consultant” for the CIA's semiautonomous covert operations arm, the Office of Policy Coordination, as it attempted to organize the Eastern bloc immigrants into an anti-Soviet resistance movement. A series of memorandums, anonymously written but clearly intended for the attention of senior agency person-

86. See Liebich, Other Shore, 292–96.
87. Ibid., 317. There were right-wing elements in the CIA strongly opposed to the tactic of employing the NCL in covert operations. This presumably is why an agency report in 1952 described the Mensheviks as a “medium for Bolshevik propaganda . . . and for Soviet intelligence activity” in the United States. Evidently, such comments were reported to Levitas, who complained to Brown the following year that “[S]ome evil forces in Washington are concentrating their best efforts in an attempt to reduce help to the labor and socialist movement of Europe, to discharge people who are not Sons of the American Revolution, etc.” Ibid., 311; Levitas to Brown, 12 May 1953, Brown Papers.
nel, reports on the factional maneuvering of Levitas and other Russian-born Mensheviks as they sought to consolidate their position in America at the expense of the more recent arrivals. According to one, Raphael Abramovitch was spreading rumors to the effect that Burnham, who favored a united front of émigré groups in a campaign of liberation, was anti-Semitic. Another speculated that Nicolaevsky was using agency money intended for anticommunist research by his partner Anna Bourgina “to finance his present intrigues.” A third, and the most detailed, alleged “that the Russian Menshevik émigrés (Abramovitch, Nicolaevsky, Levitas, et al.) are developing a deliberate and well-organized campaign” designed to “defend and enlarge the position which they have won in the anti-Stalinist front, and particularly in the American section of that front.” Among the targets of this campaign were:

A. The non-Menshevik anti-Stalin Russians, particularly those who are openly anti-Marxist . . .
B. The lesser Soviet nationalities (Ukrainians, Georgians, etc.).
C. Americans who are, or seem to be, supporting any of the persons or groups in A or B.

Various pieces of evidence were cited in support of this claim, including Levitas’s denunciation of rival anticommunist C. N. Boldyreff and a New Leader book review by David Shub that described Burnham as “a monarchist reactionary.” Most egregious, though, were the Mensheviks’ attempts to sabotage the founding Berlin conference of the Congress for Cultural Freedom in June 1950 through “their protégé” Melvin Lasky (one of the event’s principal organizers): “They fought to keep the non-Menshevik Russians . . . off the official list of Congress participants. They . . . succeeded in hiding and obscuring the official greetings of Ukrainian organizations which were addressed to the Congress. They changed Nicolaevsky’s Russian broadcast speech at the last moment.” In brief, Burnham’s papers reveal the New Leader Mensheviks trying to exploit the CIA’s patronage for their own selfish, factional purposes, and in the process undermining the United States’ major covert operation in the Cultural Cold War.
Sidney Hook and Daniel Bell were right to claim that the *New Leader’s* political significance has been underestimated by historians. During the late 1940s and 1950s the intellectuals associated with the publication played an important part in the American Cold War effort. In part, their contribution was ideological and rhetorical. By consistently portraying communism as totalitarian, innately aggressive, and monolithic, they helped create a discursive environment in which both the Soviet Union and the American communist movement came to be perceived as deadly enemies of U.S. national security. At another level, the NL intellectuals were more directly involved in the formulation and execution of Cold War foreign policy, both as expert advisers to elite officials and as participants in one of the era’s most sophisticated covert operations. All this, of course, was far removed from their obscure origins on the American or, in the case of the Menshevik émigrés, Russian Left. To adopt the terminology of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, they had been transformed from “organic intellectuals,” spokespersons of the oppositional social class from which they had originally emerged, into the deputies of the ruling group, or “traditional intellectuals.” In a word, their function in the American Cold War effort was hegemonic.92

This should not be taken as meaning, however, that the *New Leader* was a mere puppet of the U.S. Cold War spy establishment. To perceive it as such would be to repeat the same error it made when it represented the American communist movement as solely motivated by obedience to Moscow. A hegemony, after all, in the Gramscian sense of the term, is not a simple state of dominance by one group over others; rather, it is a historical bloc, or alliance—and, like any alliance, it involves elements of negotiation and even contestation. Certainly the latter was true of the NL’s relationship with the CIA, which was characterized as much by conflict as by cooperation. There is, perhaps, a wider lesson to be learned here about the dynamics of the state-private networks that underpinned much of the American Cold War effort.

In any event, it is worth bearing in mind that, as socialists and social democrats, the intellectuals around the *New Leader* had been fighting communism long before the liberal anticommunists of the CIA came on the scene. If anything, anticommunism belonged more to them as an ideology than it did the postwar liberal elites who made U.S. foreign policy. Viewed from this perspective, it is possible to see the Cultural Cold War as, to some extent at least, an internal struggle on the American Left suddenly projected onto an international backdrop. Indeed, considering the prominence of Russian social democrats around the NL, it is tempting to trace the doctrinal roots of the conflict even further back, to the Menshevik/Bolshevik split that affected the Russian Left prior to the Revolution of 1917.

92. For an extended exposition of Gramscian hegemony’s relevance to the Cultural Cold War, see Giles Scott-Smith, *The Politics of Apolitical Culture: The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA and Postwar American Hegemony* (London, 2002).