

Crusading's the Idea

My ghosts have told me something new
 I'm marching to Korea;
 I cannot tell you what I'll do
 Crusading's the idea
 Yankee Doodle keep it up etc.

Robert Lowell, 1952

Late on the night of June 23, 1950, Arthur Koestler and his wife Maine arrived at the Gare de l'Est to catch the night train from Paris to Frankfurt, whence they would proceed to Berlin. As they were searching for their carriage, they bumped into Jean-Paul Sartre, who was traveling on the same train, though he was destined for a different conference. Sartre, unusually, was alone, and the Koestlers were relieved that Simone de Beauvoir (whom they had nicknamed "Castor") was not there. They shared a picnic supper together, along with a police bodyguard assigned to Koestler by the French Sûreté following death threats from the Communists (which had culminated in the Communist daily *L'Humanité* publishing a map pinpointing Verte Rive, Koestler's villa in Fontaine-le-Port, near Paris). Although their friendship had been increasingly strained in recent years, these ideological opponents still felt a mutual fondness for each other, and they were able to joke together as the train pulled out into the hot summer night. Sartre, along with Albert Camus, had publicly disavowed Koestler's Congress and refused to attend. But Koestler felt sorry for Sartre, who confessed that night on the train that his friendships were evaporating under the heat of his and de Beauvoir's politics.

As Koestler was boarding his train, the American delegates were setting into transatlantic flights that would take up to twenty-four hours to make the journey to Germany. Although the Soviet blockade of Berlin

had recently been lifted, the only way to reach the western sector was on military aircraft, which meant the delegates had to board C-47s at Frankfurt for the final stage of what Koestler would later refer to as an "intellectual airlift." Among them were James T. Farrell, Tennessee Williams, the actor Robert Montgomery, chairman of the American Atomic Energy Commission David Lilienthal, editor of the *New Leader* Sol Levitas, Carson McCullers, the black editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier* George Schuyler, and the black journalist Max Yergan. Nobel Prize-winning genetic scientist Herman Muller brought with him a strange cargo: five thousand *Drosophila* fruit flies as gifts to German scientists who had lost their strains during the war.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Sidney Hook traveled together from Boston, Hook apparently intoxicated by the idea of how dangerous it was going to be to go to Berlin. "He had this fantasy about Communist attacks from all sides," Schlesinger recalled. "He was quite excited about it all. I think many of them were. They thought they were going to be where the action was—especially those who hadn't been in the war."¹

After his first taste of blood at the Waldorf Astoria, Hook was chafing for a full-scale campaign. "Give me a hundred million dollars and a thousand dedicated people," he cried, "and I will guarantee to generate such a wave of democratic unrest among the masses—yes, even among the soldiers—of Stalin's own empire, that all his problems for a long time to come will be internal. I can find the people."² Now, flying into a city which was surrounded on all sides by the Communists, Hook fantasized that the Russians would march into the city, "in which event every delegate would have been a prisoner of the [East German military police] in a few hours."³

Nicolas Nabokov had arrived in Berlin in May to help plan the conference, together with his wife, Patricia Blake, taking a charter plane run by a company called Youth Argosy, one of the "intermediaries" used by the CIA. Chip Bohlen had urged Nabokov to get there as early as he could, to raise the barricades on behalf of the artists who had been "the most persistent whipping boys of both the Soviets and the Nazis."⁴ James Burnham arrived shortly after Nabokov, and together they had joined up with Josselson, Lasky, Koestler, Brown, and Silone to form the conference's ruling apparatus, which was headquartered in Lasky's house.

At one of the group's meetings over dinner, Silone told how during the war he had sacked anybody in his resistance movement who turned out to be a British or American intelligence agent, because he wanted to fight "ma guerre à moi" with a clean conscience.⁵ How Josselson, Burnham, and Lasky digested this statement can only be imagined. For they knew

what Silone presumably didn't: that he was now part of a war being run by somebody else. Silone's position neatly encapsulated the painful ironies of an age that had run roughshod over the purity of people's ideals. In the 1920s, he had run an underground network for the Soviets, and then regretted it. From 1928 to 1930 he had collaborated with Mussolini's secret service, OVRA (the circumstances behind this relationship were dire: his brother had been arrested by the Fascists and was lingering in an Italian prison, where he was later to die). Writing to sever his relationship with his OVRA liaison in April 1930, Silone explained that he had resolved to "eliminate from my life all that is false, duplicitous, equivocal, mysterious."⁶ In 1942, he wrote, "The most important of our moral tasks today consists in liberating our spirits from the racket of gunfire, the trajectory of propaganda warfare and journalistic nonsense in general."⁷ In exile in Switzerland during the war, Silone had been a contact for Allen Dulles, then America's chief of espionage in Europe; in October 1944, OSS agent Serafino Romualdi was sent to the Franco-Swiss border, allegedly to deliver two plane loads of arms and ammunition to the French resistance. His real mission, "planned outside normal channels," was to smuggle Silone into Italy. And now, in 1950, Silone had once again been drawn into a clandestine world. His defenders argue that he was ignorant of the Congress for Cultural Freedom's hidden sponsors. But his widow, Darina, recalled that he had initially been reluctant to attend, as he suspected that it was "a U.S. State Department operation." A few days into the conference, Koestler, who never really liked Silone, told a friend that he had always "wondered whether basically Silone is honest or not. Now I know he is not."⁸

Also the recipients of secret benefaction were the English delegates—Hugh Trevor-Roper, Julian Amery, A.J. Ayer, Herbert Read, Harold Davis, Christopher Hollis, Peter de Mendelssohn—whose presence in Berlin was being funded covertly by the Foreign Office, through the Information Research Department. From France came Raymond Aron, David Rousset, Rémy Roure, André Philip, Claude Mauriac, André Malraux, Jules Romains, Georges Altman; from Italy there was Ignazio Silone, Guido Piovene, Alnero Spinelli, Franco Lombardi, Muzzio Mazzocchi, and Bonaventura Tecchi. By the evening of June 25, they and most of the other 200 delegates had arrived. They were assigned accommodation in billets and hotels in the American zone, and most of them, tired after the journey, turned in early that night.

They awoke the next day to the news that Communist-backed North Korean troops had crossed the 38th Parallel and launched a massive invasion of the South. As they gathered that afternoon, Monday, June 26,

at the Titania Palast, for the opening ceremony of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the Berlin Philharmonic played them in to the tenebrous strains of the Egmont overture, a propitious (and carefully selected) piece for an audience who saw themselves as participants in a darkly heroic drama.

Berlin's mayor, Ernst Reuter (himself a former Communist who had worked closely with Lenin), asked the delegates and an audience of 4,000 to stand for a moment of silence in memory of those who had died fighting for freedom or who still languished in concentration camps. In his opening speech, he emphasized the drama of Berlin's significance: "The word freedom, which seemed to have lost its power, has a unique significance for the person who most recognizes its value—the person who once lost it."⁹

For the next four days, delegates moved from one panel discussion to the next, from guided tours of the Brandenburg Gate, Potsdamer Platz, and the line dividing East from West Berlin, thence to press conferences, and on to cocktail parties and specially organized concerts. The five main debates were themed around "Science and Totalitarianism," "Art, Artists and Freedom," "The Citizen in a Free Society," "The Defense of Peace and Freedom," and "Free Culture in a Free World." A polarization of thought over how best to oppose the Communists soon emerged, neatly encapsulated in speeches given by Arthur Koestler and Ignazio Silone. Koestler called for the formation of the Western intelligentsia into a *Kampfgruppe*, a fighting squad unequivocally pledged to toppling Communism. "Schlesinger was there, and he made a dry-as-dust, unemotional statement. After that we had Koestler who spoke from the heart, and he moved many people. It was a crusade—Koestler had changed the tone,"¹⁰ recalled Lawrence de Neufville, who was monitoring events closely for the CIA.

The aggressive Cold Warrior tone was epitomized by James Burnham's distinction between "good" and "bad" atom bombs, a thesis tested on the Koestlers at dinner a month earlier. On that occasion, Burnham had explained how the USA could render Russia impotent in a day by dropping the bomb on all major Russian cities. "He looked quite pleased at the idea," noted Mammae Koestler (she also noted that "Burnham looks very sweet and gentle . . . but he is much less scrupulous about means than [Koestler]";—he also said "he wouldn't necessarily reject torture in certain cases").¹¹ Using the kind of language which petrified reality and which was one of the contributing factors of the Cold War (on both sides), Burnham now announced that he was "against those bombs, now stored or to be stored later in Siberia or the Caucasus, which are designed

for the destruction of Paris, London, Rome, Brussels, Stockholm, New York, Chicago, . . . Berlin, and of western civilisation generally. . . . But I am . . . for those bombs made in Los Alamos, Hanford and Oak Ridge and guarded I know not where in the Rockies or American deserts [which] for five years have defended—have been the sole defense of—the liberties of western Europe.”¹² To which André Philip replied that when atom bombs fall, “they do not distinguish between friend or foe, enemy or freedom fighter.”

Burnham and Hook both turned their fire on those who used moral equivalence to question America's condemnation of the Soviet Union. “Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, who refused to attend the Congress even to defend their point of view there, were quite aware of French and American injustices to Negroes when they supported the Resistance to Hitler,” clamored Hook. “But they can see no justice in the western defense against Communist aggression because the Negroes have not yet won equality of treatment.”¹³ This equality was not far off, according to George Schuyler, who circulated a report to delegates, complete with statistics, demonstrating that the situation of blacks in America never stopped improving, and this was thanks to the capitalist system's constant ability to adapt to change. The black journalist Max Yergan endorsed Schuyler's report with a history lesson in the advancement of African Americans since the Roosevelt era.

Burnham, who in his trajectory from socialism to the right had simply leapfrogged over the moderate center, had no time for the spineless man of the left. “We have allowed ourselves to be trapped and jailed by our words—this leftist bait which has proved our poison. The Communists have looted our rhetorical arsenal, and have bound us with our own slogans. The progressive man of ‘the non-Communist Left’ is in a perpetual tremor of guilt before the true Communist. The Communist, manipulating the same rhetoric, but acting boldly and firmly, appears to the man of the non-Communist Left as himself with guts.”¹⁴ As Burnham stood there and inveighed against the Non-Communist Left, some delegates asked themselves whether the black or white version of the world offered by the right (captured by Koestler's biblical invocation “Let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay!”) was perhaps just as threatening to liberal democracy as that offered by the far left.

Hugh Trevor-Roper was appalled by the provocative tone, set by Koestler and taken up by other speakers. “There was very little in the way of serious discussion,” he remembered. “It wasn't really intellectual at all in my opinion. I realized that it was a reply in the same style to [the Soviet peace conferences]—it spoke the same language. I had expected

and hoped to hear the Western point of view put forward and defended, on the grounds that it was a better and a more lasting alternative. But instead we had denunciations. It left such a negative impression, as if we had nothing to say except ‘Sock them!’ There was a speech by Franz Borkenau which was very violent and indeed almost hysterical. He spoke in German, and I regret to say that as I listened and as I heard the baying voices of approval from the huge audiences, I felt, well, these are the same people who seven years ago were probably baying in the same way to similar German denunciations of Communism coming from Dr. Goebbels in the Sports Palast. And I felt, well, what sort of people are we identifying ourselves with? That was the greatest shock to me. There was a moment during the Congress when I felt that we were being invited to summon up Beelzebub in order to defeat Satan.”¹⁵

Sidney Hook rallied to Koestler's defense but had to concede that his friend could “recite the truths of the multiplication table in a way to make some people indignant with him.” He also had the irritating habit of grinning “like a Cheshire cat” every time he scored a rhetorical point. Silone was much more flexible, arguing that a Christian spirit of social and political reform in the West would, in and of itself, steal the fire from the god of Communism. André Philip also represented the moderate view, arguing for a middle way between Russia and America: “Europe today is feeble after its long and painful sickness. The Americans send us penicillin to treat this illness, and the Soviets send us microbes. Naturally, any doctor would prefer a mixture of the two. But our duty as Europeans must be to deal with the microbes as soon as possible so that we no longer have need of the medicine.”¹⁶

To the hard-liners, this espousal of “equidistance” was nothing short of heresy. “Neutralism was, as an idea and as a movement, sponsored by the Soviets,”¹⁷ declared Melvin Lasky, taking up Robert Montgomery's cry that “[t]here is no neutral corner in Freedom's room!” Reluctant to join in this rhetorical crusade, the British delegation rallied to Talleyrand's admonishment “surtout pas de zèle.” “I couldn't see why the world should be set aflame to purge the personal guilt of people like Borkenau and Koestler,”¹⁸ concluded Hugh Trevor-Roper.

The appropriateness of political converts proselytizing the world was becoming a key question of the Berlin Congress. “Then a Herr Grimme arose, a parson of sorts with a voice like a foghorn, to argue that all these concrete questions were basically religious,” reported Sidney Hook. “He spoke with an eloquent emptiness and became concrete only at the end when he descended to personalities and made some contemptuous remark about Koestler being a ‘political convert’ who now was fervently opposing

what once he had fervently supported, thus showing he had never surrendered his dialectical materialism."¹⁹

Koestler had already discovered the resentment of those who had never been Communists towards political converts such as himself. Repeating the arguments, Koestler wrote: "Ex-Communists are not only tiresome Cassandras, as the anti-Nazi refugee had been; they are also fallen angels who had the bad taste to reveal that Heaven is not the place it is supposed to be. The world respects the Catholic or Communist convert, but abhors unfrocked priests of all faiths. This attitude is rationalized as a dislike of renegades. Yet the convert, too, is a renegade from his former beliefs or disbeliefs, and quite prepared to persecute those who still persist in them. He is nevertheless forgiven, for he has *'embraced'* a faith, whereas the ex-Communist or the unfrocked priest has *'lost'* a faith, whereas the become a menace to illusion and a reminder of the abhorrent, threatening void."²⁰

The problem of the "tiresome Cassandras" was also troubling official circles. Edward Barrett, assistant secretary of state for international information, felt obliged to question the wisdom of "current tendencies to lionize . . . ex-Communists and put them on pedestals from which to lecture all citizens who had sense enough never to become Communists in the first place. Some of us suspect the typical ex-Communist—particularly the recent ex-Communist—has great value as an informer and tipster but hardly any as a propounder of eternal verities."²¹ It was becoming increasingly apparent that the U.S. government's embrace of the Non-Communist Left would have to be kept secret from some of its own key policy makers.

Josselson kept out of sight, though he kept track of everything that transpired. He observed Hugh Trevor-Roper's reaction to the crusaderish tone with growing alarm. Trevor-Roper and the rest of the British element made clear their dissent whenever they got the opportunity. But this became increasingly difficult, as "the managers" (Lasky, foremost amongst them) on the podium during the sessions carefully avoided giving the "table thumpers" the floor. Lasky was everywhere, organizing, cajoling, drafting press releases, staging the dramatic entrance of Theodor Plievier, the German author of *Stalingrad* and a former Communist who was hiding in Stuttgart. Plievier had originally recorded his message to the Congress. But on hearing the news of the invasion of Korea, he flew to Berlin, defying the danger that he might be kidnapped by the Soviets or East Germans while visiting Berlin (though the likelihood of such a calamity was reduced by the provision of around-the-clock security by the Americans).

Lasky's high profile infuriated Wisner back at OPC. There was good reason to be concerned. On June 24, the eve of the Congress, the office of Gethart Eisler, propaganda chief of the East German government, issued a statement tracing a fire in the Communist House of Culture in East Berlin to the coterie of "American police spy Melvin Lasky." Eisler's statement, which was reported in American newspapers, said the attempt to burn down the Communist club was intended as a prelude to the opening of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (which Eisler described as "an imperialist intellectual six-day bicycle race"), but that the plot had misfired and the flames were quickly extinguished. Lasky, when asked about the incident, answered with his customary sarcasm: "Yes, it's true. We tried to set the house on fire by dropping fireflies disguised as potato bugs from a helicopter."²² But Wisner was not amused, cabling instructions to Berlin that Lasky be removed from any visible connection with the Congress.

But it was to take more than the removal of Lasky to stem the rumors surrounding the Congress. Some delegates speculated about who was footing the bill. The grand scale on which the Congress was launched at a time when Europe was broke seemed to confirm the rumor that this was not quite the spontaneous, "independent" event its organizers claimed. Lawrence de Neufville had so much money he didn't know what to do with it: "I don't where the money came from. I never had checks or anything, I just seemed to have the cash in marks. We all did."²³ This did not escape the notice of Trevor-Roper, who began to smell a rat. "When I arrived I found the whole thing was orchestrated on so grandiose a scale . . . that I realized that . . . financially it must have been funded by some powerful government organization. So I took it for granted from the beginning that it was organized by the American government in one form or another. That seemed to me obvious from the start."²⁴ Years later, the CIA's Tom Braden reflected that simple common sense was enough to find out who was behind the Congress: "We've got to remember that when we're speaking of those years that Europe was broke. If there was a dime to be had anywhere it was probably in some criminal organization. *There wasn't any money.* So they naturally looked to the United States for money."²⁵

The conference concluded on June 29 with a dramatic speech from Arthur Koestler, who cried triumphantly to a rally of 15,000 gathered under a blistering sun at the Funkturm Sporthalle, "Friends, freedom has seized the offensive!" He then read out the Freedom Manifesto, a fourteen-point declaration which was offered as a new constitution for cultural freedom. Drafted by Koestler after an all-night session at Lasky's

base at the Hotel am Steinplatz in Charlottenberg, the manifesto was "pushed through by him, Burnham, Brown, Hook and Lasky by forceful offensive tactics, so that virtually no opposition was encountered, according to Mamaine Koestler.²⁶ But one article of the declaration which expressed intolerance of Marxist ideas was vigorously contested by the British contingent, who demanded that the offending reference be excised. Essentially, the British were objecting to the assumption that guided the more militant anti-Communists at the conference—just as it did many American foreign policy makers—that the writings of Marx and Lenin were less "political philosophy than the field manual of Soviet strategy."

After incorporating the British amendments, the manifesto was adopted as the moral and philosophical cornerstone of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Addressed to "all men who are determined to regain those liberties which they have lost and to preserve and extend those which they enjoy," the document stated: "We hold it to be self-evident that intellectual freedom is one of the inalienable rights of man. . . . Such freedom is defined first and foremost by his right to hold and express his own opinions, and particularly opinions which differ from those of his rulers. Deprived of the right to say 'no,' man becomes a slave."²⁷ It declared freedom and peace to be "inseparable," and warned, "Peace can only be maintained if each government submits to the control and inspection of its acts by the people whom it governs." Other points stressed that a prerequisite of freedom was "the toleration of divergent opinions. The principle of toleration does not logically permit the practice of intolerance." No one "race, nation, class or religion can claim the sole right to represent the idea of freedom, nor the right to deny freedom to other groups or creeds in the name of any ultimate ideal or lofty aim whatsoever. We hold that the historical contribution of any society is to be judged by the extent and quality of the freedom which its members actually enjoy." The manifesto went on to denounce the restrictions on freedom imposed by totalitarian states, whose "means of enforcement far surpasses that of all the previous tyrannies in the history of mankind." "Indifference or neutrality in the face of such a challenge," it continued, "amounts to a betrayal of mankind and to the abdication of the free mind." It expressed a commitment to "The defence of existing freedoms, the reconquest of lost freedoms," and (at Hugh Trevor-Roper's insistence) to "the creation of new freedoms . . . [to] new and constructive answers to the problems of our time."²⁸

Here indeed was a manifesto to read from the barricades. Koestler, a modern-day Robespierre (albeit one whose two American bodyguards

flowered close by), thrilled to the occasion. This was the framework for highlighting the commitment of individuals and institutions to total freedom of expression, to the uninhibited flow of ideas and opinions. If Communists and Fascists alike had systematically violated the principle of *tabula animam*, here was a pledge to resist any attack on the principle of *tabula animam*. This document was a litmus test for liberty. By it, the Congress for Cultural Freedom itself would stand or fall.

As the conference closed, its Washington sponsors began celebrating. Wisner offered his "heartiest congratulations" to all those involved. He in turn was congratulated by his political patrons. Defense Department representative General John Magruder praised it as "a subtle covert operation carried out on the highest intellectual level . . . unconventional warfare at its best." President Truman himself was reported to be "very well pleased." American occupation officials in Germany sensed it had given "a palpable boost to morale of West Berlin, but believed its most important effect would ultimately be felt by western intellectuals who had been politically adrift since 1945." The Congress for Cultural Freedom, one report claimed, had "actually impelled a number of prominent cultural leaders to give up their sophisticated, contemplative detachment in favor of a strong stand against totalitarianism."²⁹

This conclusion was perhaps a little exaggerated, designed to sell the Congress to high-level strategists in government. Certainly, Hugh Trevor-Roper and the British contingent were yet to be convinced. Immediately after his return to England, news reached Trevor-Roper that State Department officials had complained to their Foreign Office counterparts that "your man spoiled our Congress." This was enough to confirm Trevor-Roper's suspicions about the role of the American government in the Berlin affair. But it also revealed official irritation with the way Trevor-Roper had conducted himself. Josselson—and his superiors in the CIA—understood that renewed efforts would have to be made to win over British intellectuals to their project.