The Bridges of Ideas: Transnational Network of the Book Program for Eastern Europe, 1956-1990

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Abstract

This proposed contribution reflects on how one, relatively small U.S.-led program of cultural diplomacy shaped the attitude of Polish intellectuals towards liberalization and openness to the free world during the Cold War. The importance of the topic lies in the fact that this long-lasting literary service could be considered as a vital tool for creating more space for political and cultural freedom in Soviet-bloc countries. The program represented the spirit of solidarity and friendship between Eastern Europe and the U.S. that, even now, should not be forgotten. That thirty years after the book program ended, Eastern Europe still lacks a transnational perspective on defending universal liberal values and the process of gaining freedom in the region before 1989 demonstrates the importance of bringing the Eastern and Western narratives closer together, by reexamining the legacy of the book program today.

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How to transmit democratic values to the societies suffering under a dictatorship? This mission has driven generations of U.S. policymakers since George Kennan formulated the strategy of psychological warfare against the Soviet Empire but implementations of this policy are still poorly covered by the literature (Tromly, 2019). The paper reflects on how one, relatively small U.S. led influence program shaped the attitude of Eastern European intellectuals towards being more liberal and open to the free world during the Cold War. The so-called book program was a joint covert action of the U.S. government, the East European diaspora, and readers of books prohibited behind the Iron Curtain. In the whole period of 1956-1989, the book program gave away 10 million books to the population of Soviet-dominated Europe in the effort to undermine communist rule there. Together with Radio Free Europe broadcasting, the book program was a brilliant smuggling operation to free people’s minds from the dominant narratives of the dictatorship.

The importance of the topic lies in the fact that this long-lasting literary service could be considered as a vital tool for making more space for political and cultural freedom in Soviet-bloc countries. The early book program mechanism brings a fresh look at the origins of the tamizdat and samizdat circulation in Eastern Europe and the transformation of the "banned books" readers into a very much alive milieu of anti-government protesters. Not only dissidents’ creativity played a strong role. The book resistance was an organized effort initiated from outside Eastern Europe through the covert channels of the book program. In its mid and late stage, this platform vastly contributed to the empowering dissent movements by bridging them with the West and by building good foundations for the 1989 breakthrough. The intellectual bridges built by the U.S. Cold War influences projects have lasted until today in a form of the Eastern European-U.S. alliance.
To a certain extent, my research follows the attempt to de-centralize the Cold War history, stressing the importance of "local level actions and decisions" (Pieper Mooney and Lanza, 2013; Davies, 2015). I argue that this battle for the mind was a very ground game. Low-level actors played a more complex role than it was assumed by the brilliant book of my predecessor Dr. Alfred A. Reisch. Following his discoveries, my study does not ignore the importance of state politics, the Cold War, etc. because governments were never very far off in this story. I, indeed, put some effort into revealing the secret ties that link those “marginal” and undere xplored low-level actors to the powerful state politics. By connecting diaspora publishing and distribution projects with the American policymaking, I reconstruct the network of the covert operation and give a bigger picture of what was previously thought to be unconnected efforts of private individuals. In this paper, I try very briefly to describe a tapestry of the book program pattern by pattern from top to down.

The book program was a part of the U.S. government strategy of the Cold War (Reisch, 2013). From 1956 to 1971, the program was nestled by the Free Europe Committee (FEC) as a covert operation to promote a free movement of ideas and human rights. Committee links to the funding state remained secret. The program budget varied through time but not exceeded five million dollars yearly for all Eastern European countries. After FEC terminated in 1971, the book program continued under a new cover International Literacy Centre which is now recognized as a CIA-funded organization. Although, the book program was directed by American citizen George Minden from New York headquarter, the project was a real transnational and largely autonomous instrument of the Cultural Cold War. Similarly to the bigger enterprise of Radio Free Europe (RFE), the CIA supervised the project expenses but did not influence the form and content of a message transmitted to Eastern Europe (Johnson, 2010). On the Washington level of the book operation, The White House political and Department of the State staff were involved in programming the project and assessing its development. President of the United State personally signed the documents allowing this covert operation to continue every two years. And U.S. Congress supervised the program.


Most of the book program field representatives in Europe belonged to the Eastern European diasporas and they were not directly linked to any state power. Especially, there were no direct CIA-migrants relations. Minden organization in New York served as a go-between. Distributors acted, first of all, as local leaders of diaspora communities. Minden, director of the program, did not have to build distribution points from a scratch. Those centers had been already established by migrants themselves and served, first of all, as Eastern European community centers. The program did not pay excessively for the distribution services. However, U.S. taxpayers' money was used to make distribution a more efficient mechanism. Also, book program subsidized under-funded diaspora publishing endeavors – not all but many. The program was purely non-violence, low-profile attempt, and relatively safe procedure of the Cold War interaction. Small was a part of its beauty. Yet small was also very much responsible for its good cover. CIA’s involvement in the book distribution platform was never compromised.

Unlike the RFE, the book program gathered many more numerous media outlets or just individuals loosely connected but all worked in the field of publishing and distributing “banned” books under the umbrella of the book program. To map the European network of the book program I use the nodegoat web-based management data analysis and visualization software. The data set comes mostly from the Hoover Institution Archives, George Minden collection who was in charge of all field operations. In this paper, I focus on personal aspects and has created a data set of 147 distributors and publishers taking part in the program as field representatives. Those 147 persons constitute the vast
majority of the network but not all participants are included due to the incompleteness of the narrative sources. I also entered in the base one more record, which is not one person but rather a collective actor – the program Board of Directors – CIA covert operation staff which supervised the program from Washington D.C.

Inspired by the project “Reading Kultura from a distance” (Labov, 2019) I generate the modest geographic visualization of the network (see geographical visualization, attached). Network embraced eighteen European cities and Washington and New York in the United States. This was, then, an overseas mechanism with the Washington-based Board of Directors on the one end and the European representatives on the other. The biggest node was Paris with 42 field representatives worked there, the second position was held by London (24 field workers). Then Rome and Vienna came ex aequo in third place with 15 representatives. Those metropolises worked for years as the hubs for the book program Eastern European operations. Also, in this visualization, Europe and the United States are linked by the solid lines. Those lines imperfectly symbolize the transatlantic alliance by pointing out 23 overseas travels of the program director taken in 1973-1990 from the New York headquarter to visit the main European nodes of the program.

Working on social visualization, I have been able to produce the following three classifications so far: gender, nationality, and the role in the book program network (see social visualization, attached). The gender comparison clearly shows that the women were underrepresented and men dominated almost all aspects of network capacity. 117 men and 28 women took part in the network with one record – Board of Directors – whose gender cannot be identified because this area of the book project is restricted for the research. At least seventeenth nations took part in the book program operations. Among the biggest national groups were Poles (42 members), Russians (31 members), Czechoslovaks (23 members), and Hungarians (12 members). This visualization does not cover how those people interacted with each other but still gives a basic sense of transnationalism and diversity in the network which was the program’s most precious asset. And last, I added the capacity dimension which shows that it was, first of all, a distribution vehicle. Most of the people did the distribution services of the book program. Publishing projects required fewer people than distribution but the line between distribution and publishing work might have been blurred.

The media outlets run by the diaspora people in Western Europe were a major factor in the book program but those outlets usually did not do the smuggling job themselves. The Eastern Europeans traveling the West – on their way back home – carried forbidden items behind the Iron Curtain. Statistics and visualizations, as above, on smugglers networks and routes, are still hard to obtain but some efforts has been made so far to map channels through which books penetrated minds behind the Iron Curtain (see visualization on London distribution to Poland). I also trace some general tendencies in the books smuggling relying on the narrative sources, mostly on distributions reports kept in the RFE files, Hoover Institution Archives. Smugglers adopted strategies to carry their loads safely through customs and borders. The Hoover collections provide good insights into the conspiracy the book transporters developed to penetrate the communist bloc. This work needed to be done covertly because communists governments presented a hostile attitude towards book transfer from the West and, sometimes, tough measures were applied to stop the flow of ideas.

Carrying banned ideas into Eastern Europe – despite the attacks from communists’ security units – represented the very frontline of the book program. For some carriers, it was common to work in groups since some people might have felt anxieties about taking all risks alone. A sports team during a tournament or a philharmonic orchestra on a tour in Western Europe could become a team of smugglers. In such cases, prohibited books were spread out among many participants of a given group to better balance the risk. To minimalize a potential hazard books were sometimes published in a very small size specially designed for a book program, for a smuggling purpose. Smugglers could have hidden those small formats even in the pocket. More organized and long-lasting smuggling efforts included secret hiding places, for instance, in the walls of cars, trains, or vessels. The most successful undertaking of that kind was, perhaps, a special van with safe places for books prepared by the London-based Czechoslovak distributor Jan Kavan. In the 1970s and the 1980s, the Kavan bus ran regularly to Czechoslovakia with a secret mission to deliver a few tons of forbidden materials to the dissidence milieu (Weschler, 1999).
Most of the book smugglers, though, operated on a smaller scale and used only public transport for the smuggling purpose. Elżbieta Novicka, a Polish University lecturer from Cracow, who regularly traveled to Sweden and back as an academic tourist, pushed the whole idea of places to hide books even one step further. Like some other Polish visitors, she had been given the most desired Western and emigre books for years and free of charge. One time around 1985 she came to Norbert Żaba, a Polish distributor in Stockholm, and was offered so many books that she could not risk being caught at the border by the Polish customs. She turned herself into a more professional book smuggler to Poland and provided herself with the empty containers of the washing powder. Then, she put forbidden books into those powder boxes and asked Swedish manufacturer to lock those boxes up so the wrapping looked original and brand new. This innovation increased her smuggling capacity to 57 kilograms (about 120 pounds) per each travel which was, possibly, the record of individual smuggling.

A tactical move from the book program, which largely facilitated the flow of books, was to diversify the communication lines to Eastern Europe. This meant establishing distribution channels in as many countries and regions as possible, including even more distant destinations outside Europe. For over 30 years of operation, the book program mastered the art of book smuggling. There were some ebbs and flows but, over time, the network got bigger and broadened “the avenues access” to the target countries. Distribution facilities in Western Europe relied mostly on unknown seamen, drivers, students, sportsmen, and casual visitors who did the smuggling jobs for the book program. Also giving books out to the communist officials, when they were traveling West, increased the chances of books getting through the Iron Curtain. Official delegations often were privileged enough not to be searched by the communist border security forces. At the same time, some small entrepreneurs – or rather professional smugglers of consumer goods between East and West – worked for the book program as well. On this ground level, the network was likely to involve a wide range of social strata as well as a full spectrum of generations, backgrounds, and opinions.

“The American policy rather not created those smuggling networks and channels for uncensored information. The book program assured only better communication with the already existing ones and intensified the dissemination of information through those channel” (Sowinski, 2019). But smugglers represented the purely social infrastructure of the book program. They were chosen as the instrument of American policymaking, they were not CIA contractors or grantees. The mastery of this cultural diplomacy was that many people involved did not realize that they a part of the book program, the U.S. covert influence program. Thanks to the unwittingness, the book program was not only a highly decentralized transfer of ideas but also an international endeavor. “People from all over the world were involved to do the smuggling job. Statistic on smugglers nationality are not available for the mid- and late book program but numbers from the early years of the Polish program (1959-1963) clearly shows that at least non-Polish nationality constituted 10 percent of all carriers transported publications to Poland” (Sowinski, 2020).

The way to make the book program a safer procedure was a mailing scheme, which started in 1956 and continued through 1990. Perhaps, even as much as half of all the books were mailed by post service to the target areas behind the Iron Curtain (Reisch, 2013). Those parcels, however, were often lost in the post office. The communist governments acted as a censor in the post office and often book were not permitted to arrive any further but still, a few chosen groups of people were granted permission to receive those banned items. The mailing scheme can be seen as an attempt from the book program to testify the limits of openness of communist regimes but it was never a fully operational tool due to the massive confiscation in the post office. As at least Polish example shows, mailing operations served as proof for transnationalism in the network of book program because publications were often dispatched from the Polish outlets in Western Europe to non-Polish destinations in Eastern Europe. This was also another tactic of the book program to mislead the censorship and to increase the chances of successful delivery.

The program tried hard to monitor the infiltration of the printed words in the target areas33Namely: Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and the USSR. among the readers’ circles that empowered the pro-democracy thinking in Eastern Europe. No solid statistics are available due to the lack of data but CIA experts were “reasonably certain that at least two-thirds of our materials reached their intended au-
dience, i.e., the intelligentsia and other elite groups. We also know from comments of defectors and recent exiles that our books, newspapers, and periodicals are eagerly read and passed from hand-to-hand.44Paper prepared in Central Intelligence Agency dated on November 13, 1987, FRUS 1981-88, vol. 6, Soviet Union 1986-89, ed. James Graham Wilson in: Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume VI, Soviet Union, October 1986–January 1989 - Office of the Historian There are a lot of suggestions that smuggling books created very much alive communities of forbidden books readers. The market value of smuggled books rose dramatically after they crossed the borders. These books drew immediate attention and interest. There were queues for books in Eastern Europe, and the exchange grew. Some people overpaid, while others made money, sometimes even by lending for a fee. Sometimes books would never be returned, or they would come back after many months completely worn out (Reisch, 2013, Sowiński, 2020). Some people spent a lot of time in search of uncensored materials. And this searching was usually a source of great excitement and adventures, at least equally important as the reading.

Similarly to domestically produced underground books, enigre and Western books penetrated a fabric of Eastern European elites and middle classes as symbolic items, which represented desired values of national independence, solidarity, religious beliefs, freedom (Komaromi, 2015). Consequently, efforts of the book program could be considered an important tool for transforming cultural landscapes in Eastern Europe. Many dissidents in Eastern Europe circles limited their publishing ambitions to spreading the typewritten texts (so-called samizdat) due to the very repressive political context. In Czechoslovakia, where the underground printing techniques remained rare, the influx of Western books could have been even more dominant than in Poland. Also, USSR was rather scattered with the books trafficked from the outside than by home-made samizdats.55According to the budget preliminary for 1983, cited in the Reisch book, the book program planned to send more than 150 thousand books to the USSR, which number, if successfully delivered, exceeded the domestic production of the samizdat. Also, numbers for Czechoslovakia looked higher than the samizdat’s production capacity in this country. But opposition in all Eastern European countries developed its underground book scene and domestic movement of free ideas. Not everything in this story was an external intervention by the Western world (Kind-Kovacs, 2013). And without the existence of the fierce readership in Eastern Europe, the external book service would not have made that much sense.

Looking from hindsight, the book program and other special programs for Eastern Europe leave their mark as one of the most successful U.S. covert operations of the Cold War (O’Rourke, 2018). And at the same time the book project – together with Radio Free Europe broadcasting – represented the best of American values like diversity, open society, and democratization. My presentation, thus, praises American peaceful engagement in world affairs and demonstrates how collaboration in highly international space can bring more freedom and choice to the nations, which are unable to launch a successful campaign in the repressive environment of dictatorship (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Especially, U.S. government-Eastern European diasporas relations in the book program can be seen as a fine example of long-term action in the shared interests. The State-private network of the book program successfully derived power and enthusiasm from both government and grass-rooted activism to build long time bridges of ideas across the Iron Curtain.

Primary sources:


George Minden collection and Radio Free Europe (RFE/RL) collection, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, USA.

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