

# Out of the Alcoves

*How did America win the Cold War? An unusual new film recalls the important role played by a small and much maligned band of labor leaders, intellectuals, and political figures.*

*by Seymour Martin Lipset*

Sixty years ago, four young radicals all found their way to the same tiny corner of New York's City College. There, in an alcove of the college cafeteria, they underwent a political and intellectual transformation, emerging from bitter struggles with campus Communists as zealous anti-Stalinists and eventually as leaders of the anti-Stalinist movement in America. The four men and their movement are the subject of an unusual documentary film called *Arguing the World*, which has been shown in scattered theaters around the country and is scheduled to be aired nationally on PBS on March 26.

The four went on from the alcoves to play prominent roles as writers, thinkers, and editors of politically important anti-Stalinist magazines: Daniel Bell, a social democrat then and now; Nathan Glazer, a radical Zionist then and a Democratic neoconservative now; Irving Kristol, a Trotskyist then and a Republican neoconservative now; and Irving Howe, a Trotskyist then and a moderate socialist at his death in 1993. After World War II, all four wrote for influential anti-Stalinist organs such as *Partisan Review*, the *New Leader*, and *Commentary*. In 1953, Kristol helped create *Encounter*, a transatlantic anti-Stalinist journal based in Britain, and Howe went on to found *Dissent* in 1954, along with the late Michael Harrington (who deserves to be in the film, but did not go to City College). In 1965, Kristol and Bell launched the *Public Interest* (with Glazer later replacing Bell as coeditor). This is only the barest thumbnail

sketch of their extraordinary careers—Bell and Glazer, for example, went on to do important work as sociologists. Both are now retired from Harvard University.

But *Arguing the World* is not only about these four men. It is a contribution to the larger story of anti-Stalinism, the highly energized brand of anticommunism that played a major and not fully appreciated role in undermining the Soviet Union. Thousands of anti-Stalinist ex-radicals like these four emerged almost everywhere Marxist groups existed—in Johannesburg, Buenos Aires, Colombo, Brussels, Warsaw, Mexico City, Toronto, London. All had become convinced that the Soviet Communists had betrayed the Russian Revolution, trampling the dream of a free and democratic socialism and creating instead a brutally exploitive totalitarian society, while at the same time undermining the struggle against fascism in pre-Hitler Germany and in the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39. Very often, their convictions grew out of dismaying firsthand experiences. Returning to London in 1945 from negotiations with Stalin and Vyacheslav Molotov at Potsdam, British foreign secretary Ernest Bevin, who had had plenty of experiences with the Stalinists as the head of Britain's Transport and General Workers Union, was asked what the two Soviet leaders were like. Just like the Communists, he replied—by which he meant, of course, the Communists in the Transport Workers Union and the Labor Party.

The ex-radicals were bitter enemies of the Stalinists, and they made the downfall



*A Communist leader of the 1930s rallies his followers for a march in New York City's Union Square.*

of the Soviet Union and the destruction of the Communist Party their most important goal. That was one of the qualities that distinguished them from other anti-communists. With a few notable exceptions—such as senators Robert La Follette, Jr.,\* Henry “Scoop” Jackson, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan (another veteran of City College)—they were not forces in electoral politics. Rather, as the film makes clear, they battled the Stalinists, the Stalinists’ friends and fellow travelers, and the soft Left in the nation’s cultural and political institutions—in the intellectual and academic worlds, in the trade unions, in the Democratic Party and other political groups, and in the student movements of the 1930s and ’60s.

Let me return to the alcoves for a moment. I spent most of four years in them, from 1939 to ’43, one year as a Trotskyist and the rest as an unaffiliated

\*La Follette, Wisconsin’s Progressive Party senator, switched to the Republican line in 1946. Left-wing but anticommunist, he earned the enmity of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, which worked to undermine his candidacy. La Follette lost the Republican primary by a relatively small margin. The winner was Joseph McCarthy, who went on to a seat in the U.S. Senate.

anti-Stalinist socialist. I came to know the four men in the film well, and remained friends with three of them afterward.

The alcoves were the heart of radical politics at City College, a venue for a steady stream of debate and invective between Stalinists and anti-Stalinists. They were room-sized chambers in the college cafeteria with wooden benches on three sides and an opening to the main eating area. In front of each alcove was a large table, strong enough to hold the orators who frequently stood atop it to harangue those who gathered. The Stalinist or Communist alcove was known as the Kremlin, and the one next door, inhabited by a variety of anti-Stalinist radicals—Trotskyists, Socialists, anarchists, socialist Zionists, members of assorted splinter groups—was called Mexico City in honor of Leon Trotsky’s exile home. Proximity, of course, led to shouting matches, even though the Communists forbade their members to converse with any Trotskyists, whom they defined as fascist agents. My recollection is that students, occasionally joined by some junior faculty, were there all day, talking, reading, arguing, and eating.



“Arguing the world” at a 1940 City College gathering. Standing on the right is Irving Kristol.

In the world beyond the alcoves, most of the anti-Stalinists were social democrats, descendants of the Russian Mensheviks, but the Trotskyists had the keenest understanding of the character of Stalinism. Leon Trotsky, Soviet commissar of foreign affairs and head of the Red Army under Lenin (1917–24), had clashed with Stalin after Lenin’s death, arguing for a somewhat less repressive and more consistently revolutionary socialism, and was rewarded with exile in 1929 and assassination 11 years later.

For the anti-Stalinists, the alcoves were classrooms. The older and more knowledgeable taught the newer recruits. They gave lectures, answered questions, and explained passages in Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky. The principal form of recreation, other than talk, was chess. Irving Howe was my first political instructor among the City College Trotskyists. Ironically, the last time I saw

him was at Rosh Hashanah services at a Conservative synagogue on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Fifty years had passed, yet Irving was clearly unhappy to have an erstwhile comrade catch him praying.

All Trotskyists had party names. I was Lewis. Horenstein became Howe. He was the only one to keep his pseudonym. Kristol was Ferry. As he mentions in the film, during most of his time at City he remained on the periphery of the Trotskyists, among the close sympathizers, along with a good friend, Earl Raab. In theoretical discussions, James P. Cannon, the national leader of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, used to speak of “the party periphery,” pronouncing the last word as *perry-ferry*, so when they finally joined, Raab became Perry and Kristol took the name Ferry.

After I joined the Trotskyist youth movement in 1939, I recruited a good friend of mine, Peter Rossi, who later

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went on to become a leading sociologist. What party name did he pick? Rosen. This largely Jewish group finally recruits an Italian American, and he wants to be known by a Jewish name. Irving Howe took on the awkward task of telling Rossi that it would be better if he used a non-Jewish pseudonym.

Although the film doesn't mention it, some of those who hung around the alcoves were government agents. I found out later that the authorities could become quite confused about political matters. In the 1970s, when I needed a security clearance in order to serve on a federal commission, I listed Irving Kristol as one of my long-time acquaintances, in part because he was the most conservative person I had known for more than 20 years. A reference from him, I thought, might speed the clearance. When an FBI agent came around to discuss my file, however, my relationship with Kristol was his main concern. Was I aware, he asked, that Irving Kristol had been active in the Social Problems Club at City College? Not only was this a ridiculous error—the Social Problems Club was a Communist front—but the agent apparently did not have a clue about what Irving Kristol, the founder of the neoconservative movement, had been up to politically since he left City College.

Only a short part of the film deals with the alcoves. Most of it uses still pictures and interviews to chart the political and intellectual careers of the four men. It is one of the very few documentaries that has attempted to show the world of political intellectuals—how they are formed, how they change, and how they affect political life and society at large.

From the 1930s on, the anti-Stalinists tried to convince others on the left that the Soviet Union was the antithesis of everything that democratic socialism stood for, a much greater enemy of democracy than capitalism. Mario Soares, a Socialist who led the fight to stop the Communists from commandeering Portugal's 1974–75 revolution (and

later became his country's president), summed up the anti-Stalinist position when he said that the conservatives are our rivals, the Communists our enemy.

In the United States, the role of the anti-Stalinist radicals was particularly important because few liberals were as vigorous in their rejection of Stalinism. Many liberals up to the 1960s were opposed to dictatorship and communism but wanted everyone left of center to work together. They were particularly impressed by the strength of the Soviet Union and its seeming opposition to fascism (except, of course, during the years of the Hitler-Stalin pact). They were reluctant to believe that the Soviet Union was a repressive society.

The Communists were never uncertain about who their enemies were: they always considered the Trotskyists, the Social Democrats, and the anti-Stalinist trade union leaders and intellectuals their main foes. Whenever they gained strength anywhere in the noncommunist world, they used it to try to dominate organizations on the left, including, in the United States, the Democratic Party and the labor movement. All of these efforts spawned committed anti-Stalinists. Communist domination of the Washington State Democratic Party for a time in the 1930s made Henry "Scoop" Jackson into an informed and active anti-Stalinist. (James Farley, one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's chief political operatives, once said there were 47 states and the Soviet of Washington.) In Minnesota, where Governor Elmer Benson followed every twist and turn of the Communist line, Hubert Humphrey, Evron and Jeane Kirkpatrick, and Max Kampelman, among others, were galvanized into action.

The contest was particularly heated inside the trade unions, since their shared Marxist background told both the Communists and the anti-Stalinist radicals that the unions were the essential institutions. At the peak of their strength in the 1930s and '40s, the Communists controlled unions accounting for more than a third of the members of the Congress of Industrial Organizations and

a significant segment of the American Federation of Labor. Out of the nasty battles fought within the trade union movement emerged anti-Stalinist leaders such as David Dubinsky, Walter Reuther, Albert Shanker, George Meany,



Before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947, Ronald Reagan criticized Hollywood Communists but defended free speech.

and James Carey. After World War II, the anti-Stalinist unions played an important role in the international arena, especially through the labor-financed Free Trade Union Committee, a massive effort to support democratic trade unions in post-war Europe and other regions.

The contribution to the anti-Stalinist struggle by conservative and Republican groups is more difficult to evaluate. Though obviously anticommunist, the conservatives lacked the firsthand knowledge and passion of the anti-Stalinists. They were inclined to view the more numerous and outspoken New Dealers and liberals as more important foes.

During the 1940s and '50s, the congressional investigations of Communist activities in the United States, chiefly the work of right-wing Republicans, handed the Stalinists a useful means of rallying support in the liberal and civil liberties communities. Unlike America's real radicals, from the Wobblies to the black militants of the 1960s, the Communists, as Dan Bell notes in the film, never defended their right to be Communists. They

either lied about their membership in the party or took the Fifth Amendment, arguing that the conservatives were attacking them because they were liberals, trade unionists, blacks, or Jews. Very often the tactic worked.

From the anti-Stalinists who became conservatives—including James Burnham, Whittaker Chambers, and Irving Kristol—the Right gained a political education and, in some cases, an injection of passion. The ex-radicals brought with them the knowledge that ideological movements must have journals and magazines to articulate their perspectives. In 1955, for example, William F. Buckley, Jr., launched *National Review* at the urging of Willi Schlamm, a former

German Communist. In its early years, *National Review* was largely written and edited by the Buckley family and a handful of former Communists, Trotskyists, and socialists, such as Burnham and Chambers. It played a major role in creating the Goldwaterite and Reaganite New Right and in stimulating an anti-Soviet foreign policy.

The most important convert to anti-Stalinism, of course, was Ronald Reagan, a former trade union leader and near-radical liberal Democrat, whom the Hollywood Stalinists initially regarded as a close ally. After becoming president of the Screen Actors Guild in 1947, he quickly learned about the ways of the Stalinists from battles within the union and the Hollywood community. When he reached the White House, he appointed a large number of anti-Stalinists—including Elliot Abrams, Carl Gershman, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Max Kampelman, and Richard Perle—to high positions on his foreign policy and defense teams, despite their social democratic commitments.

I believe that the vigor of Reagan's for-

eign policy and of his opposition to the evil empire was largely a product of his anti-Stalinism rather than his conservatism. He pressed the military and ideological struggle against communism much more intensely than his efforts to cut taxes, balance the budget, or enact the right-wing social agenda. Most conservatives and businesspeople were willing to deal with Communists in order to expand trade, as Richard Nixon and George Bush did (along with Democrats Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton). Reagan and other anti-Stalinists were not.

The four intellectuals featured in *Arguing the World*, like other anti-Stalinists, often went their own ways on questions of domestic and foreign policy. Kristol and Howe represent the two poles, with Kristol becoming a neoconservative Republican and Howe remaining very much a man of the Left. But the anti-Stalinists were united in their opposition to the rising New Left in the 1960s. As Irving Howe makes clear in the film, the anti-Stalinists quickly recognized Stalinoid traits in the young radicals—their opposition to debate, to a university open to all thought, to ideological pluralism, and, in the end, to democracy itself.

Nat Glazer and I were on the faculty of the University of California at Berkeley in 1964 when the radical attack on political pluralism—precursor of the more recent insistence on political correctness—began with the Berkeley Free Speech Movement (FSM). Glazer and I tried to stem the movement, at one point addressing hundreds of student activists from an impromptu soapbox on the roof of a captured police car in front of Sproul Hall, the Berkeley administration building. We argued that civil disobedience was warranted in resisting manifest evils that could not be fought by democratic means. But we said that the Berkeley evil was not of that magnitude. The issue in Berkeley was never free speech, which was abundant, but a stupid university regulation, Rule 17, that required that public political activities could only be conducted in the context of a debate, with different sides represented.

The New Left failed from the beginning to understand the totalitarian nature of Stalinism. Indeed, although its leaders did not know it, the Free Speech Movement itself was a target of the Stalinists. As I learned at an off-the-record meeting that a *New York Times* editor held with some faculty and administrators, the most powerful Communist trade union leader in the San Francisco Bay area had proposed an unusual deal to the University of California regents. Communist students on the Berkeley campus would put an end to the movement's protest if the Regents would agree to expel Mario Savio and other activist leaders and modify Rule 17. The Stalinists regarded the FSM leaders as rivals and uncontrollable adventurers and anarchists.

How strong were the Stalinists in America? Especially during the 1930s, but continuing into the '50s and '60s, they were a major force in intellectual life, in publishing, and in Hollywood. They dominated a large segment of the labor movement, and they had influence within the civil rights groups. Anti-Stalinists who raised questions about the extent of this influence were charged with redbaiting and McCarthyism, but the information now coming out of archives in the former Soviet Union and from U.S. government files supports many of their arguments. We now know, for example, that Harry Bridges, the head of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Association who gained fame as a leader of the 1934 general strike in San Francisco, was not only a member of the Communist Party of America but served on its Central Committee. Alger Hiss, who famously insisted that he had been unjustly accused of spying for Moscow, was apparently identified in a coded Soviet intelligence cable as one of theirs. Copies of the receipts sent to Moscow for the millions in annual subsidies received by the Communist Party of America and of orders from Moscow to change the party line and leadership explode the Left's cherished notion that the American Communists were an independent radical force.

The revelations from the archives are a continuing source of astonishment, especially to the many liberals who remain in denial, refusing to acknowledge that the Communists were a real force in the United States. But the anti-Stalinists are not surprised. Sometimes the fear of being denounced and ostracized as redbaiters, and of losing or being denied jobs, particularly in the intellectual and academic worlds, kept them from saying as much as they might have, but by persistently writing and speaking out about the nature of Stalinism and the Soviet Union they encouraged the majority of American Democrats and liberals to accept Ronald Reagan's efforts to break up the Soviet Union.

Before Reagan, few of us expected to see the demise of Soviet Communism. I think many feared that Whittaker Chambers was right when he wrote that we were on the losing side of history. Fortunately, Reagan knew better. He understood that the empire was not only evil but inefficient and ineffective, and that if pushed, it would collapse. So did others, including anti-Stalinist political and labor leaders such as Moynihan and Al Shanker, who knew from personal experience that the Communists could be beaten. As novelist Arthur Koestler wrote,

the ultimate struggle for freedom would be between the Stalinists and the anti-Stalinists. And, I'm glad to say, we won.

## Epilogue

**I** cannot resist adding a personal story. Before entering City College in 1939, I attended Townsend Harris High School, then affiliated with the college, which enabled bright students to get through in three years. Like the college, Townsend harbored large numbers of Communists, Trotskyists, and Socialists, most of whom moved on to the alcoves. I was the leader of the anti-Stalinists, having joined the Young People's Socialist League at 14. For much of my stay at Harris, I argued almost daily with a leader of the Young Communists. We argued about everything: the Moscow trials, the Spanish Civil War, the Popular Front, Roosevelt and the New Deal, the role of the German Communists in aiding Hitler's rise to power. After we graduated, the young Communist went on to Brooklyn College and eventually became a distinguished psychologist.

Fifty years later, I attended the reunion of our Harris class. He was there, and I beckoned to him. When he came over, the first words he said to me after half a century were, "You were right." Sometimes you win an argument.