

**Cold Libraries:**

United States Information Agency Libraries during the Cold War 1953 - 1991

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The Cold War was a period of high political tension between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which brought the US and USSR close to actual war several times, and greatly shaped the modern world in which we live. The tension began shortly after the fall of the German Third Reich in 1945, and lasted until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in 1955 and lasting through the entire Cold War period, nuclear and thermonuclear weaponry was mastered and used by the Soviets and the US to keep one another in a perpetual state of check.<sup>2</sup> Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) became the standard during the 1960's, the idea being that if either the US or USSR attacked the other, both would be destroyed because the attack would unleash a retaliatory chain reaction of nuclear and thermonuclear missiles.<sup>3</sup> The war was said to be 'cold' because each side was metaphorically frozen, unable to attack the other, stuck as if in ice. The Cold War was a war of ideals, beliefs and ways of life. It was essentially capitalism versus communism—good versus evil.

During this time of escalating tensions and nonmilitary confrontation (except for the proxy wars fought in Korea and Vietnam),<sup>4</sup> both the United States and the USSR used propaganda to undermine each other. Information and misinformation was the US's greatest tool during the Cold War. The goal for US propaganda (in the form of radio, film, books, and cultural exchanges) was to weaken the logic and beliefs of the communists in order to promote unrest within the USSR and to encourage democratic revolution. One of the most influential avenues by

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *The Cold War: A Military History* (London: Cassell & Co, 2001), 16

<sup>2</sup> Norrie Macqueen, *The United Nations since 1945: Peacekeeping and the Cold War* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Inc., 1999), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Todd A. Hanson, *The Archaeology of the Cold War: The American Experience in Archaeological Perspective* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2016), 60.

<sup>4</sup> Freedman, *The Cold War*, 18.

which the United States preached its anticommunist message abroad was through the United States Information Agency (USIA), or as it was better known overseas, the United States Information Service (USIS). The USIA began on August 1, 1953 under President Eisenhower,<sup>5</sup> and continued operations until the year 1999 when its functions were absorbed by the State Department.<sup>6</sup> The USIA's motto was "Telling America's Story to the World."<sup>7</sup>

During the Cold War, the United States desired to show the world that US culture and way of living (provided by capitalism) trumped life under communist rule. The USIA fulfilled this lofty mission by providing information about America to communist countries through its famous Voice of America (VOA),<sup>8</sup> a radio broadcasting program, and by a less famous medium, libraries and information resource centers. One of the specific tasks of the USIA was to "Strengthen foreign understanding and support for United States policies and actions."<sup>9</sup> To accomplish this, in addition to the VOA and libraries, the USIA hosted an international visitor program, youth exchange, artistic ambassador program, Fulbright program, and cultural centers for learning English.<sup>10</sup> The USIA focused heavily on sharing culture between the US and foreign nations. This was to put a positive light on US culture, and to convince other nations (especially

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<sup>5</sup> Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 96.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 484.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> George R. Urban, *Radio Free Europe and the Pursuit of Democracy: My War Within the Cold War* (New York: Vail-Ballou Press, 1997), 114.

<sup>9</sup> United States Information Agency, *USIA: Its Work and Structure* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1987), 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-10.

communist ones) that what was being printed in anti-American literature and produced on film by the Soviets was not true.

When the USIA came into being in 1953, it inherited from the USIS over one-hundred libraries located at USIS posts around the world, which were used during WWII by the Office of War Information (OWI).<sup>11</sup> These were stationed in US embassies and consulates all over the globe.<sup>12</sup> The first USIS library to open was the Benjamin Franklin Library in Mexico City in 1942<sup>13</sup> with help from the American Library Association (ALA).<sup>14</sup> All library and information resource centers, no matter where they were located, strived to achieve the following two goals during the Cold War: to make current US government policies available to foreign citizens, and to provide authoritative information on American life and culture.<sup>15</sup> Towards the end of its time, the USIA presented information on America in an electronic format at USIA libraries. However, for locations where this was not possible, libraries and resource centers used books and periodicals to teach foreigners about American politics, history, and institutions.<sup>16</sup> Libraries were used as a method to socially transform those that were exposed to the collection to be more

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<sup>11</sup> Pamela Spence Richards, "Cold War Librarianship: Soviet and American Library Activities in Support of National Foreign Policy, 1946-1991," *Libraries & Culture* 36, no. 1 (2001): 199.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 104.

<sup>13</sup> Hans N. Tuch, ed., *USIA: Communicating with the World in the 1990s* (Washington, DC: U.S. Information Agency, 1994), 43.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson P. Dizard Jr., *Inventing Public Diplomacy: The Story of the U.S. Information Agency* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2004), 179.

<sup>15</sup> United States Information Agency, *United States Information Agency* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1998), 25.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

receptive of American culture, desire democracy, and to be inoculated against Soviet anti-American propaganda.

In 1963, there were 174 USIA/USIS libraries in eighty-five countries.<sup>17</sup> In 1970, there were a total of 188 libraries in eighty-seven countries.<sup>18</sup> By 1983, the number shrank to only 122 libraries and nine reading rooms in seventy-nine countries.<sup>19</sup> This is in comparison to the 1953 total of 196 information resource centers in fifty-three countries.<sup>20</sup> The US Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations noticed this twenty-year decline (1963-1983), and in 1983, a five-year plan was put in place to bring the libraries back to where they were in the early 60's.<sup>21</sup>

Librarians for USIA libraries were either American citizens or indigenous citizens who were supervised by USIA officials. USIA librarians utilized many of the same techniques public librarians used at that time in order to spread information in communities and to get participation from locals. For instance, librarians loaned books to those who could not make it to the library in various outreach services, such as in Burma where cases of books were circulated in universities and then donated to local Burmese libraries.<sup>22</sup> Librarians also mailed notices to locals, such as in

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<sup>17</sup> Committee on Foreign Affairs, *U.S. Information Service Activities in Africa* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1963), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Joan Collett, "American Libraries Abroad: United States Information Agency Activities," *Library Trends* 20, no. 3 (1972): 539.

<sup>19</sup> Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Certain USIA Overseas Activities* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1983), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Collett, *American Libraries Abroad*, 539.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

Budapest, to let them know about prominent US articles that could be obtained from the library through a table of contents service.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to radio broadcasting, cultural outreach programs, and libraries, the USIA printed textbooks used by foreign schools and universities, and produced hundreds of pro-American films.<sup>24</sup> In 1956, the USIA published book *Outline of American History* had been printed 5 million times and had been translated into twenty-six languages; and the book *Picture Story of the U.S.* had been printed 2 million times and had been translated into ten languages.<sup>25</sup> In 1965 alone, the USIA allocated more than 15 million books to its libraries around the world.<sup>26</sup> The USIA also hosted American cultural exhibits to spread awareness of American ingenuity in the areas of medicine, art, and industry.<sup>27</sup> All of the USIA's attempts aimed to convert those ambiguous about the virtues of the American way of life into believers. It is also important to note that the USIA had a direct role in influencing the production of movies in Hollywood, so that objectionable material that might damage the US's image overseas, would not be seen and negatively influence the audience of 150,000,000 foreign weekly viewers.<sup>28</sup>

The USIA had many rules when it came to producing videos of its own for international audiences. The producers used basic psychological principles in order to shape film to work the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Osgood, *Total Cold War*, 105.

<sup>25</sup> United States information Agency, *So the World May Understand* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1956), 5.

<sup>26</sup> Dizard Jr, *Inventing Public Diplomacy*, 179.

<sup>27</sup> Robert E. Elder, *The Information Machine: The United States Information Agency and American Foreign Policy* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1968), 255.

<sup>28</sup> Cull, *The Cold War*, 184-85.

best possible influence on the audience. For instance, the dialogue in films had to limit complicated words and idioms, be relatable to the viewing audience, focus on one idea, limit abstract thought, not use disguises, be broad, not be controversial, use emotional appeals, and to be graphically pleasing.<sup>29</sup> This was to ensure that the propagandistic message being portrayed in the USIS films was retained, and to limit any confusion that might be experienced by the viewing audience. The USIA also believed that the films they produced should strive to be shot in the language of the people who would be viewing them. This was to serve as a subliminal message that what was being communicated in the film was meant specifically for them and them alone.<sup>30</sup> A common belief held by the USIA was that by making the audience familiar with American culture would inevitably cause friendliness towards the US, which would then make foreign audiences receptive to the American message being broadcast in all forms of media.<sup>31</sup>

The USIS Video Library Catalog was robust and separated into sections such as Agriculture, American Studies - US History, American Studies – US Society, The Arts – Dance, The Arts – General, The Arts – Literature, Education, Environment, Media, Medicine and Public Health, Scenic U.S.A., Science and Technology, and Sports.<sup>32</sup> Videos in the form of VHS and Betamax were made available for purchase through the USIS Video Library, and cost anywhere between \$20.00 USD to \$55.00 USD; rapid delivery of a video cost an extra \$70.00.<sup>33</sup> Some of

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<sup>29</sup> Leo Bogart, *Premises for Propaganda: The United States Information Agency's Operating Assumptions in the Cold War* (New York: The Free Press, 1976), 105-06.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-12.

<sup>31</sup> Leo Bogart, *Cool Words, Cold War: A New Look at USIA's Premises for Propaganda*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: The American University Press, 1995), 88.

<sup>32</sup> United States Information Agency, *USIS Video Library Catalog* (n.p., 1989).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

the titles made available in the catalog were *Generations of the Land* (Agriculture), *Achievements in American Black History: Black Doctors in America* (American Studies – US History), *American Ballet Theatre in San Francisco* (The Arts – Dance), *If You Want to Study in the U.S.* (Education), and *Cocaine Pain* (Medicine and Public Health).<sup>34</sup> The video description for *Climates of the United States* found in the Science and Technology category is as follows: “From subartic [sic] to tropical savanna, this film is a broad survey of eight major climatic regions of the United States; it focuses on how climate affects the population, activities, economy, and lifestyles in each region.”<sup>35</sup>

The focus of USIA libraries and the USIS Video Library was the same: promote American ideals and culture, lead those corrupted by communism to capitalism and democracy, and make US foreign policy palatable. One way that the libraries promoted democracy was the way in which they modeled themselves after their US counterparts. As stated before, USIA librarians used the same techniques as public librarians back home, transforming libraries located in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Ecuador to ones found in New York and Pennsylvania. For instance, librarians used bookmobiles in some countries to get information to the wider community.<sup>36</sup> They also answered reference questions in person, by mail, and by phone,<sup>37</sup> a service readily found in any US public library. Libraries were also used by the public for concert halls, lecture halls, and theaters.<sup>38</sup> An important appeal factor for USIA libraries was that they were

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Dizard Jr., *Inventing Public Diplomacy*, 180.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Osgood, *Total Cold War*, 295.

completely accessible to the public in content and service, a concept not found in many foreign libraries at the time.<sup>39</sup> USIA librarians even advanced library science in the nations they were stationed. For example, Emily Dean, a librarian stationed in Turkey in the early 50's, introduced Turkish libraries to the Dewey Decimal System.<sup>40</sup> Before Emily came along, instead of using a standard set of rules for cataloging, Turkish libraries shelved books according to size.<sup>41</sup>

Even though the Cold War is over, the ripples it created in politics, culture, diplomacy and foreign policy can still be felt today. USIA libraries and information centers played a very important role to educate others on American culture and policy, with the ultimate goal to make foreigners friendly towards America and its activities abroad. Librarians and library staff provided foreign citizens with free access to materials and information that might not be made available by their governments, demonstrating that America believes in information for all (a key component of a democracy). USIA librarians even went above and beyond, like those in Iran in the 1960's who helped train Iranian interns and start a library school at Tehran University.<sup>42</sup> These librarians even helped start the Iran Library Association.<sup>43</sup> While USIA libraries were used by the US government as hubs to distribute propagandistic material and to shape public opinion, they served a purpose far beyond what the government had intended. They brought knowledge to thirsty, intellectually dry individuals, inspiring users such as Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka who

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<sup>39</sup> Dizard Jr., *Inventing Public Diplomacy*, 179.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>42</sup> Richard T. Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, Inc., 2005), 156.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

repeatedly visited the USIA library in Nigeria.<sup>44</sup> Whatever the reason for their existence, they proved to be beneficial not only for their patrons, but also for world society.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

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