

## [Comments on Stephen Koch, Double Lives](#)

Page published by System Administrator on Monday, August 3, 2015

Date: Thu, 22 Feb 1996 9:35:32 +0900 (JST) From: [JLM@twics.com](mailto:JLM@twics.com)

Note from David Bailey, editor: I would like to encourage similar comments from members of the h-ideas network regarding recent interesting and important books which might not be entering the list through the normal reviewing process. I have divided John's message on two books for the sake of clarity of discussion.

Recently I have been reading a couple of very scary books. My comments on the second will appear in a second post. The first, by historian Stephen Koch is *\_Double Lives: Stalin, Willi Munzenberg and the Seduction of the Intellectuals\_*. It describes the life and times of Willi Munzenberg, colleague of Lenin, a founding organizer of the Communist International, a man described by Koch as "the Bolshevik Rupert Murdoch" and at one time a much-envied model for Joseph Goebbels. The blurbs on the back cover contain two quotes from reviewers. Angus Calder writes for *\_Scotland on Sunday\_* that "Newspapers, magazines, books, plays, films appeared in the west at his instigation...the fellow-travelling innocents who joined the front organizations her controlled included some of the major names in 20th-century culture --Mann and Gide, Hemingway and Eluard. Bad-tempered Sinclair Lewis and wise-cracking Dorothy Parker. " Anne McElvoy, writing for *\_The Times\_* says, "An excellent history of Soviet Propaganda in the west under Stalin... Koch, to his credit, has not taken a single rumour for granted. This is an excellent example of both scholarship and detective work, sourced from newly- opened archives in Germany and Russia."

Does anyone know of serious reviews, or have personal opinions, concerning this book or these issues? Since it makes strong claims about the relationship of ideas to history, I think that it might be of interest to us.

John McCreery  
Yokohama  
February 22, 1996

---

Date: Fri, 23 Feb 96 14:02:24 -0500  
From: Hughie Lawson <[a06432f@msumusik.mursuky.edu](mailto:a06432f@msumusik.mursuky.edu)>

Just a Question. I could not tell from the John McCreery's post why Koch's a scary book. Request elaboration.

---

Date: Sat, 24 Feb 1996 12:34:37 +0900 (JST) From: [JLM@twics.com](mailto:JLM@twics.com)

Hughie Lawson asks what is scary about Stephen Koch's *\_Double Lives\_*.

What's scary to me about it is the suggestion that so many of the people I have been taught, off and on, were among the brightest and best of their generation were, as Willie Munzenberger put it, "innocents" unwitting until it was too late of the purposes for which Stalin supported their cultivation. This evokes powerful memories in me of the '60s and '70s, when I myself had a hand in suggesting to students that there might be something attractive in Mao's little read book and the communes, etc. that his policies shaped. I recall too well how revulsion at the Vietnam War (and a good deal of fear for my own draftable hide) my notions like "overthrowing the system" seem plausible as well as attractive. Then I recall, too, how often I heard teachers and colleagues dismiss "conspiracy theories" out of hand in favor of "critique" rooted in broad conceptions of "social forces."

I do realize the virtue of separating the source of ideas from their value. As Terry Eagleton and Slavoj Zizek both observe, there is nothing in truth that makes it immune to ideological uses. The word "scary" was deliberately chosen. What bothers me about the book is not a logical difficulty, but a visceral reaction to it.

John McCreery  
Yokohama  
February 24, 1996

---

Date: Sat, 24 Feb 96 17:03:35 EST  
From: chris suggs <JCSJJ%[CUNYVM@UICVM.UIC.EDU](mailto:CUNYVM@UICVM.UIC.EDU)>

There was a review of Koch, about two months after the book came out, in the Nation. It centered on Josephine Herbst and Koch's account of her involvement and wasn't, to my mind, nearly responsive enough to the book.

I don't intend to go on at great length about a book that seemed meretricious to me, but because I have done a considerable amount of research in American cultural relations with the Comintern in the late 'twenties and throughout the 'thirties, I felt Koch had missed the reality of those relationships and had seized on a peculiar, and particularly minor, knot of implications which he mistook or decided to misrepresent as the whole.

I would make two caveats and an observation: 1) much of what Koch calls "secret" and "sinister" throughout, creating an air of grave danger hidden from sight, was publicly acknowledged policy of the journals and agencies, and indeed of the Comintern, used in fact to attract adherents; 2) Koch's end notes are often "reflexive," let us say; that is, some refer back to the very paragraph for which they are offered or to an almost identical passage elsewhere in the text, but not to any verifiable source external to the text; 3) it appears as if Koch has used the character of Munzenberg as a structural device from which to hang various pieces of a story to create a narrative coherence not otherwise sustainable, such that even when there is no trace of him, Koch invokes his necessary presence.

The condition of research in these matters is pretty difficult these days, and I'm in no position to say Koch's documentary evidence is useless, but his handling of it, the sensationalist tone of some of his

prose, and his tendency to conflate unrelated matters into prima facie evidences of either conspiracies or invidious machinations makes me feel he wants to discredit a side of American cultural history rather than uncover and present a reasonable account of an historical moment.

Jon-Christian Suggs  
Professor, English  
John Jay College/CUNY  
New York, New York 10019  
[jcsjj@cunyvm.cuny.edu](mailto:jcsjj@cunyvm.cuny.edu)

[Return to Menu](#)