

Truthiness in the Cold War

WILLIAM I. HITCHCOCK

Review of Melissa Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies: The Battle over Truth in Stalinist Eastern Europe* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2017)

Across college campuses these days, small knots of worried students and their professors have been gathering for public readings of George Orwell's *1984*—a not-too-subtle effort to link Trump's America to the dystopian world so cannily sketched by one of Britain's leading anti-fascists. But one needn't search only in works of fiction for chilling parallels to contemporary events. Melissa Feinberg, examining Eastern Europe in the 1940s and 50s, finds there a prequel of sorts to our era of high-visibility political trials, sharply ideological mass media, and public arguments about the existence of facts and truth.

One should not press the comparison too far: open defiance of the state in the Stalin years led to the gulag or the firing squad. But Feinberg's analysis helps us understand how political "truths" were manufactured and disseminated in the Communist bloc, and how Eastern Europeans survived under such oppressive ideological constraints. The depressing takeaway: in the face of powerful demands by the state to conform to obvious falsehoods, most people submit. Flickers of dissent or doubt are kept hidden behind cupped hands and closed doors.

The originality of Feinberg's research lies

in her close attention to the lived experience of the participants in the "battles for truth" across the Iron Curtain. She attends to the manufacturing of official propaganda by agents of the state, as well as to the dilemmas of daily life in a world of half-truths, lies, and fear.

Feinberg stumbles out of the gate with a few breezy passages in the introduction that equate Western and Communist-bloc propaganda. She asserts that both sides in the Cold War developed a "common political vocabulary" and a "shared political culture" that "relied on tropes of truth and lies to justify their political vision" (x). Yes, states in both blocs manufactured clumsy propaganda and accused their enemies of heinous crimes and treachery. But the presence of propaganda in both East and West during the Cold War does not prove the existence of a shared political culture. The available and officially tolerated avenues for dissent, protest, activism and public questioning of authority in the West even at the height of the Cold War could not be found across the Iron Curtain until perhaps the late 1980s.

Feinberg regains her footing in the early chapters that demonstrate the means through which Communist bloc states manufactured political "truths." She

examines the theatrical and widely publicized show trials of leading Communist Party figures, especially László Rajk in Hungary in 1949 and Rudolf Slánský in Czechoslovakia in 1952. These show trials served concrete political and ideological purposes: to reveal a Western-led conspiracy right in the heart of the Communist leadership; to ratchet up a sense of fear and insecurity that legitimated intense surveillance and repression; to demonstrate the state's omniscience; and to compel even the most powerful political figures to confess before the "evidence" marshaled against them.

Feinberg supplements that familiar story with fresher evidence on the elaborate "peace offensives" of the 1950s. The World Peace Council (WPC), set up in Poland in 1948 on the initiative of the Cominform (Communist Information Bureau), soon boasted affiliates in over seventy countries. Through public meetings and assemblies, it presented a political narrative of the Communist world's desire for peace, coexistence, disarmament, equality and social justice. Local peace committees mushroomed across the Eastern bloc and in western Europe as well, all mouthing the same slogans: that the Western states were militaristic, fascistic, unfree, oligarchical and bent on triggering a nuclear war, while the Communist states were peace-loving, anti-fascist and egalitarian. In March 1950, the WPC issued the Stockholm Declaration calling for total nuclear disarmament, and hundreds of thousands signed petitions and staged public rallies. Combined with simultaneous show trials, these peace offensives aimed to establish a political truth: that the benevolent and fraternal Communist bloc was under siege, that the enemy would use both overt and covert means to attack the forces of socialism, and that any dissent from this interpretation of Western behavior would be evidence of treason.

Having demonstrated the tools that Eastern bloc governments used to

construct the "truth" of the Cold War, Feinberg then pivots away from elites and propagandists to explore the attitudes and beliefs of individuals living behind the "curtain of lies." Here she makes her most original contribution: what did people in the East really believe? Did they retain the capacity for skepticism? How did they distinguish between truth and falsehood?

To answer these questions, Feinberg draws upon transcripts of interviews of Eastern European refugees who had fled the Bloc during the 1950s. Conducted mainly by Radio Free Europe and Voice of America staff (many of whom were anti-Communist émigrés themselves), these interviews present a wealth of revealing detail, but they are of course problematic sources. The RFE and VOA staff bore with them into the interviews a fixed idea of their own—that the Communist bloc was a closed, totalitarian and fearful House of Horrors. Their interviews tended to seek confirmation of this image so that their stories could be broadcast back into the Eastern bloc, there to prove to furtive listeners that the truths peddled by the regimes in the East were elaborate falsehoods. Feinberg's aim here is twofold: to extract from the interviews the granular detail of how Eastern Europeans made sense of official propaganda, but also to understand how the stories of refugees were used, packaged and redeployed by RFE as verifiable "knowledge" about the hidden Communist bloc.

These refugee interviews painted a picture of life shrouded by fear: fear of the regime, of the secret police, of spies and informers. Children turned on parents, and friendships withered in the face of distrust and anxiety. Refugees reported shortages of food and medicines and described the general apathy that had taken hold over many citizens. Some refugees asserted that Easterners were eagerly awaiting the war of "liberation" that Americans had long promised to free the captive peoples of the Soviet bloc. Feinberg speculates

that in their interviews, refugees over-emphasized the repressive nature of Eastern regimes, perhaps to appease their eager RFE interlocutors. But she also introduces the idea that their perception of a smothering, all-knowing state was at least in part the product of the very reports that RFE had been broadcasting back into Eastern Europe, and which secret radio listeners regularly consumed. Citizens were caught in a propaganda machine, making their ability to separate truth from fact increasingly difficult.

Saturated by ideological narratives manufactured by Communist regimes and by Western broadcasts, individual citizens had to develop a talent for extrapolating fact from fiction. Feinberg does not give us quite enough detail on this intellectual process, suggestively pointing only to a few accounts of people who read the popular press and media against the grain in order to “imagine the real meaning of news” (176), as one Czech student put it. Evidently, doing so became an act of autonomy and dignity in the face of state propaganda.

And here lies a crucial difference between Feinberg’s period and our own. In the Stalinist era, millions of captive peoples fought hard to sustain the idea that facts and truth existed beyond a world of state

propaganda. Eyes and ears, honed by years of practice, learned to differentiate the base falsehoods in the media from plausible truths. Yet in our own era, when Americans are free to say, and read, and believe whatever we wish, millions of us choose to adhere to obvious untruths. From the grassy knoll to the faked moon landing, from Vince Foster to Pizzagate, outlandish conspiracy theories, none of them manufactured by state organs, have nonetheless been canonized as truth across much of the land. Eastern Europeans in the Stalin age yearned for truth and took risks to seek it out. Many people today prefer to hide behind our own curtain of lies.

William I. Hitchcock teaches twentieth-century international history at the University of Virginia. His latest book is The Age of Eisenhower: America and the World in the 1950s, which will be published in March 2018 by Simon and Schuster.