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Friedrich Torberg, The Congress for Cultural Freedom, and Anti-Communist Ideology in 1950s and 1960s Austria

My paper describes the writer Friedrich Torberg's (1908-1979) contribution to the construction of postwar Austrian identity. Torberg, though still a figure of some popularity in Austria, has not been the subject of much scholarly interest; he is often dismissed as an aggressively pro-American ideologue or, paradoxically, not ideologically consistent, since he was not a member of any political party. Yet as a proud Jew reasserting a leading role in public life, Torberg by his very presence gnawed at the collective conscience of an Austrian political culture that had quickly institutionalized its own victim status and lack of complicity with Nazism. Torberg's status has long been part of conventional wisdom with regard to the formation of the second Austrian republic, yet has rarely been treated in much depth; his multi-media presence, journal *Forum*, and contribution to questions of Austrian identity-formation in the Cold War years have not been central to any analysis of the Cold War in Austria to date.

As a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Torberg was socialized in a political system that, for all its shortcomings, promoted a transnational and multi-ethnic approach to contemporary political problems. Torberg's early career as a writer and journalist in Vienna and Prague during the interwar years can be seen as a somewhat typical fate of those who looked with some longing at the best aspects of the monarchy, particularly those that had been lost to the nationalist movements that contributed to its breakup. Forced to flee Austria in 1938, Torberg experienced the years of the Second World War in exile in Paris, where he joined the expatriate Czech army, and ultimately in Hollywood, where he worked as a screenwriter under contract to Warner Brothers, and New York, where he worked for *Time* magazine. Upon returning to Vienna in 1951, he became one of the most influential arbiters of literary taste and political culture in the turbulent postwar Austrian scene, working first for the daily *Kurier* and the radio station *Sender Rot-Weiß-Rot*, which were principally supported by the American occupation forces (he maintained his American citizenship after his return), before becoming the editor of *Forum*. It was as editor of *Forum* that Torberg developed his unique anti-Communist strategy: advocacy of political reform modeled on the institutions of American democracy, combined with cultural practice that emphasized lines of continuity to the artistic innovations of turn-of-the-century Vienna.

Torberg's career in post-war Austria became inextricably linked to the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an organization founded by prominent Western intellectuals in Berlin in 1950, and whose mission was to influence cultural and intellectual life around the world and to promote Western interests in the Cold War context. More concretely, the Congress established journals, funded academic conferences and organizations, and promoted its presence in all mass media, this with the idea of influencing intellectuals

and opinion leaders on both sides of the Iron Curtain. In 1952, Torberg began negotiating with representatives of the Congress in Paris, primarily its Executive Secretary Michael Josselson, to establish a Congress journal in Vienna; what resulted was *Forum: Oesterreichische Monatsblätter für kulturelle Freiheit*, whose first issue appeared in January 1954, and which, under Torberg's editorship until 1965, became the leading publication of its kind in Austria. (Other prominent Congress journals in Europe included *Encounter*, edited by Stephen Spender, *Der Monat*, edited by Melvin Lasky, and *Preuves*, edited by Francois Bondy.) Torberg used the journal to aggressively promote the ideals of American democracy, which in practice, at least, meant a lively journal of diverse opinion that was against totalitarianism (and more specifically, its apologists in the West) in all its historical forms and contexts. Torberg's polemical style made many enemies, and his unforgiving approach to those he perceived as Communist sympathizers drew many reprimands from his bosses in the Congress. The hurt feelings and—from a contemporary standpoint—political incorrectness of his style have left little residual good will among contemporaries and historians to take a more charitable approach to Torberg's importance as a champion of democratic theory and practice in the Austrian context.

Scholarly interest in the Congress for Cultural Freedom and its subsidiary journals has been at best sporadic. In 1966, the *New York Times* broke the story that the CCF was essentially a front organization for the CIA; since then, its activities have often been dismissed in general accounts as relics of the Cold War. This type of reception was especially pronounced in the Austrian context, with its traditions of neutrality and corporatist democracy. Torberg's lack of allegiance to any political party made him more vulnerable to personal attack and out-of-hand dismissal, though he (successfully) defended himself in court on more than one occasion against the accusation of being a CIA agent. Such discrediting of Torberg, and by extension his contribution to Austrian identity-formation, has extended into the historiography of the time, which, at least within Austrian practice, has led to an almost complete neglect of his role. This will change over time, I suspect; already impulses for a new evaluation of the CCF and its representatives have come from abroad in the important new work of Frances Stonor Saunders, in her overview of the Congress's activities, and Anne-Marie Corbin, who has introduced Torberg's *Forum* and its historical context in her recent work. These new studies indicate renewed scholarly interest in what might broadly be called the battle for the hearts and minds of European intellectuals in the Cold War. My paper looks at Austria's important place—as neutral border country and often first stop for refugees—in this struggle, and the prominent role that Torberg and his journal played in shaping the public discourse.