The man walked over and smashed the winning sculpture. Quite deliberately, then and there in the Tate Gallery. He struck it, then pushed it from the pedestal, raising his voice and, in fractured English, abusing the exhibition’s organisers. It was March 16, 1953, in the first week of an international art prize honouring victims of political oppression.

Alarmed visitors pulled the angry foreigner back from the exhibit, then attendants took charge, and someone hailed a London bobby who was outside on the chilly street. So there they were, all talking away amidst the modern sculptures, with one in pieces on the polished timber floor, and the stranger shouting about the insult, the tyranny of communism, Stalin’s henchmen, Russia, the whole damn box-and-dice of creeping totalitarianism. And the English were going to erect this abstract muck in Berlin!

Then the Fleet Street newshounds appeared. The vandal’s name was Laszlo Szilvassy: he was twenty-eight, a refugee from Hungary, and had worked as an assistant designer with the State Opera in Budapest before fleeing to the West three years before. Why had he attacked the modern work? “Those unknown political prisoners have been and still are human beings,” Szilvassy said to journalists. He continued: “To reduce them—the memory of the dead and the suffering of the living—into scrap metal is just as much a crime as it was to reduce them to ashes or scrap. It is an absolute lack of humanism.” The winning sculpture was an insult, and the refugee was unrepentant.

The Unknown Political Prisoner sculpture competition had been organised by London’s Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA). This was a modest gallery-cum-club for modern artists and their supporters, launched soon after the Second World War. Proclaiming itself a spearhead for “progressive” culture, it held regular gatherings, hosted talks and organised shows, all outside the suffocating reach of Royal Academy mastodons and Artists’ International partisans.

The ICA didn’t have a fixed base for several years, booking venues where it could for lectures or poetry readings, even staging one exhibition in the basement dance hall under an Oxford Street cinema. But in 1950 the committee took a calculated risk and moved into premises at 17 Dover Street, Piccadilly, close to the hub of Mayfair’s gallery precinct. At that point the ICA’s leading members began voicing new ambitions, particularly in the lead-up to the “Festival of Britain” scheduled for summer 1951. Regrowth was in the air. The recently founded Arts Council was supporting exhibitions and projects involving modernist culture. No wonder ICA members wondered if the institute might establish a presence on a broader stage. There was talk with a public relations agency about marketing themselves professionally.

Then the American appeared. His name was Anthony Kloman, a staff member from the PR agency, with impressive connections. He had worked at Washington’s Corcoran Gallery; and the prominent US curator and sometime architect, Philip Johnston, was his brother-in-law. Kloman spoke about an opportunity to the ICA’s director, Dorothy Morland, and the chair of the committee, Herbert Read. He had contacts in the USA, businessmen passionate about modern art, who might fund an international sculpture competition to the tune of £15,000 plus a £1000 fee for the institute. The stipulations were that the donors remain anonymous, and the prize be for a projected monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner.

Herbert Read wanted to know more about who was offering the money, a lot more. He mistrusted business and queried the benefactors’ motives. He was wary of sponsorship with strings—Alfred H. Barr of New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) had cautioned him about the demands of wealthy American donors. Read preferred a direct gift for the ICA, like the unsolicited $2500 cheque...
given by John D. Rockefeller jr. Anthony Kloman reluctantly told Read the offer came from John “Jock” Hay Whitney, the chairman of MoMA’s trustees. Read knew him as a credible figure he had met overseas, although he remained uneasy. He didn’t want the institute risking its autonomy: “I do not believe that we could possibly maintain any degree of independence if we become a charitable dependency of Big Business,” Read wrote to a friend. Besides, he was nervous about what the institute might be stepping into politically with the theme. Idealistic Read may have been, but he was no fool. The previous summer he had accompanied Hugh Trevor-Roper and A.J. Ayer as a delegate to the Congress for Cultural Freedom, a stormy talkfest in West Berlin where they watched Cold War anxieties transform into frantic rage.

Read expressed his reservations at committee meetings. Others wondered if the proposal was beyond the ICA’s organisational means, so the idea was shelved. Nevertheless, led by the artists Henry Moore and Roland Penrose, in March 1951 the committee revisited the subject. Moore reasoned it was an opportunity to encourage and build overseas links with modern sculptors. Artist members also wanted to express their compassion for the oppressed, their allegiance to creative freedom, and to honour those who suffered under fascism.

A vote was held, and, despite Read’s concerns, the ICA’s committee accepted the scheme. The money was needed, the project would enhance the institute’s international profile, and the humanitarian theme mirrored the values of the membership. To oversee the project, the committee appointed Kloman as Vice-President of Planning—an unpaid voluntary position. He was given desk space and set to organising, with assistance from Read, Moore and Penrose.

Then the unthinkable occurred. Two civil servants, Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess, walked out of a Pall Mall club one Friday afternoon late in May, and vanished into thin air. Within days the sensational news broke that they were Russian spies and had absconded to Moscow. Chatting over the revelations with a journalist acquaintance, the poet W.H. Auden mentioned that he knew the pair from the ICA, where they had attended lectures and social events. Before the week was out, national and provincial newspapers were insinuating that the Institute for Contemporary Art was a red den. This was preposterous, although Burgess had several times been drunkenly chatting up young painters at the ICA those last weeks before fleeing London. Members were staggered, with lounge room wags teasingly suggesting there were secret agents planted in the membership.

To exacerbate this situation, an offer of a cultural exchange arrived from the Russian government in autumn. They proposed subsidising a show of ICA members in Moscow, if Soviet artists could exhibit in Dover Street. Having declined the Russians, the ICA’s anxious committee pulled behind the Unknown Political Prisoner project, determined to display the institute’s integrity.

Modernists had been relentlessly persecuted in recent decades, with an unknown number sentenced to exile, the concentration camp, or the death chamber. Now the artists re-emerged in an exultant assertion of creative and intellectual liberty.

The international competition was launched at a press conference in January 1952. In attendance was an organising committee, comprising Read, Moore, Penrose and Kloman, plus John Rothenstein, the director of the Tate Gallery. Explaining that the piece would be a monument to The Unknown Political Prisoner, Read and Moore did much of the talking, the artistic standing of Moore affirming the prize’s merit and prestige. They said the entries should commemorate “all those men and women who in our times have given their lives or their liberty to the cause of human freedom”, with the award covering a £3500 cash prize to the winning sculptor. The contest would be conducted in heats: shortlisted entries would be selected at subsidiary exhibitions in different countries, leading to a grand final exhibition held at the Tate Gallery and judged by an international panel. The source of funds was not revealed and the prize appeared to be a British undertaking.

A call for entries was sent out to artists’ societies, journals and museums around the world, and the competition got under way.

Excitement was palpable fourteen months later in March 1953 when artists, dignitaries, taste-makers and social identities assembled in the Tate Gallery for the awarding of the prize. The gallery buzzed with animated conversation. Guests could see that the contestants did not include sculptors from the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites. The Cominform had barred individual participation in the competition after Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria tried to hold national heats. And no wonder, given the Slánský show trials conducted in
Czechoslovakia during November: another fourteen names had been added to the roll call of victims of political repression. Then there was talk of the offer to erect the winning monument in West Berlin, made by that city’s mayor. Artists were thrilled. But the recurring subject of conversation was Josef Stalin’s death from a stroke ten days earlier. What would Russia do now? Big Brother had gone.

The complexity of the Unknown Political Prisoner competition was explained in the speeches. This was the most ambitious art competition yet organised. The ICA had anticipated 400 to 500 entries. However, nearly 3500 application forms were initially requested from around the world, with just under 2000 sculpture maquettes from fifty-two countries being submitted for national heats.

There were 603 entries from West Germany alone—most of them from artists ill-treated by the Nazis—so an immense national heat had to be arranged for the Haus am Waldsee in West Berlin. A dozen finalists were shortlisted at that event, and local cash prizes had been donated with DM 2500 for best entry to Hans Uhlmann, and two runner-up awards of DM 2000 to Bernhard Heiliger and Egon Altdorf.

Given the enormity of the international response, Herbert Read explained, the many entrants had been winnowed down to the 146 finalists now on display at the Tate Gallery. No country had been excluded, he stressed, with artists from around the world welcome to compete. Then there was the jury. An effort had been made to assemble a distinguished and inclusive international panel. It comprised four major European and American museum directors, five European writers on art, and, representing the far side of the globe, Lady Casey, the wife of Australia’s foreign minister.

There was a range of prizes, too. Besides the grand winner (the value raised to £4525), another four sculptors were placed second (£750), as well as seven honourable mentions (£250), and eighty “runner-up” awards (£25). Diplomatically, the prizes appeared distributed nationally, with the main twelve winners representing six countries. As well, the Tate Gallery purchased several works for its permanent collection.

In abstraction lay freedom—that was the boisterous message of the sculptures amassed in the Tate Gallery. Modernists had been relentlessly persecuted in recent decades, with an unknown number sentenced to exile, the concentration camp, or the death chamber. But now the artists re-emerged in an exultant assertion of creative and intellectual liberty.

Historic exhibitions are difficult to visualise, even with photographs. The cumulative effect of a show’s layout, where pieces harmonise or strike lively contrasts with each other, is displaced by listings of who did what. In this matter, the Guardian’s critic Stephen Bone aptly summarised the styles of leading entries. Of the artists placed second, he wrote:

Barbara Hepworth (Great Britain) has carved three of her characteristic smooth, blank adumbrations of humanity; Naum Gabo, the one-time constructivist now described as American, shows a beautifully neat, elegant, carefully proportioned ornament in Perspex and black threads; Mirko Basaldella, of Italy, wishes to erect a vast criss-cross construction of coloured metal bars with a tartan-patterned nude below it (there might be possibilities in this one); and Antoine Pevsner, of France, displays a sort of wire squirrel cage of immense complexity and without any meaning other than a mathematical one.

The honourable mentions are Henri Georges Adam, of France (a sort of paper cocked hat in white marble); Max Bill, of Switzerland (some nesting hollow cubes); Alexander Calder, of the United States (an immobile mobile); Lynn Chadwick, of Great Britain (several objects like rat traps menacing a skylon); Margel Hinder, of Australia (shining wires and black clutching shapes, not without ingenuity); Richard Lipold, of the US (another wiry construction); and Luciano Minguzzi, of Italy (an agonised figure held captive in a spider’s web, at least not entirely unconnected with the subject).

In retrospect, and checking photographs, the last point identified the show’s weakness. Flouting the theme of the prize, many sculptors submitted characteristic works in their signature styles. This was the limitation with Hepworth’s sombre figures, and the geometric entries of Gabo and Pevsner which look like gleaming scientific trophies. Of the lesser prize winners, the only credible proposal appears Minguzzi’s wounded biomorphic form stretched and twisting inside a cage-like enclosure of tilted rods.

The rising British artist Reg Butler took the grand prize. A committed pacifist and wartime conscientious objector, Butler was currently the Gregory Fellow in sculpture at Leeds University (a post lined up for him by Henry Moore). His work had been featured in the 1952 Venice Biennale several months before alongside Lynn Chadwick, Eduardo Paolozzi and other new-wave sculptors chosen by the British Council. These local vanguardists rejected the polished elegance of high modernism—the purity of
Lipchitz, Brancusi, Arp and Zadkine—for a gritty ugliness. They made awkward-looking, distorted metal sculpture, sometimes using recycled machine parts while leaving thick welds and rust visible. To 1950s viewers such qualities carried suggestions of a grim technocratic future.

Coining the phrase “the geometry of fear”, Herbert Read had extolled the British artists for articulating a barren postwar outlook. The massiveness, the monumentality, most of all the eloquent beauty of modern art’s festive years was replaced with a nervy dread. Read wrote in the Biennale’s catalogue:

These new images belong to the iconography of despair, or of defiance; and the more innocent the artist, the more effectively he transmits collective guilt. Here are images of flight, of ragged claws “scuttling across the floors of silent seas”, of excoriated flesh, frustrated sex, the geometry of fear. Gone forever is the serenity, the monumental calm ... They have seized Eliot’s image of the hollow men, and peopled the waste land with their iron waifs.

Reg Butler’s winning entry distilled these qualities. It consisted of three Moore-derived standing figures on a craggy base, beneath a large cage-like steel tower topped with radio antennae. The sculptor was trying to fuse aspects of a barred cell, a scaffold and a guard tower, along with elements of radar masts he had seen in East Anglia during the war. Butler’s sculpture was redolent of intrusive authority and electronic surveillance, while those dwarfed figures cowered beneath. One appreciates why, comparing the entry to an ominous facility monitoring all it surveys, the artist-critic Patrick Heron wrote: “All the impersonal cruelty of ‘the State’ seems summed up in this horrible machine.”

Fleet Street gave the show a mighty thumb’s down. Journalists derided exhibits that were too abstract and lacked popular appeal. “Extravagant examples of abstract sculpture pullulate with devastating monotony,” groaned the Daily Telegraph, while a report in the Aberdeen Evening Post cautioned Scots readers that “modern art, like the atomic bomb, is a dangerous innovation”. The attack on the winning entry by a Hungarian exile heightened media hostility. Cartoonists drew hilarious caricatures of modern sculpture. The Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, mocked the contest in his Royal Academy banquet speech. Reg Butler’s maquette was debated even in the House of Commons, where a motion was tabled opposing the work’s rumoured installation on the cliffs of Dover.

That the exhibition itself was a declaration of artistic freedom appeared lost on Britain’s politicians and Fourth Estate. But left-wing circles twigged to these overtones, and the reaction of the Left—the Artists’ International, the Daily Worker, the New Statesman—deserves scrutiny.

Once a leading voice on the cultural scene, the Artists’ International Association (AIA) had been on a troubled course since war’s end. A gap was widening between artists with general socialist sympathies, and committed communists. There was real strain over Czechoslovakia when the USSR nakedly meddled in an election followed by a major purge of party members. Some AIA artists were outraged. Their unease was amplified by the cultural dictates of Stalin’s Cominform. Artists were dismayed to be told the music of some composers, including Shostakovich and Prokofiev, was taboo. Then they learned that abstract art was being banned behind the Iron Curtain. The AIA had tied itself in knots over its position on abstraction, but this forced the issue. Some defended the Cominform (“in our society dictatorship exists in every sphere of cultural activity”, the illustrator Paul Hogarth claimed, “the press and film monopolies, the tight control of the BBC, the attitude of galleries”). Some talked of changing the AIA’s constitution. Others resigned their memberships.

Faced with the Unknown Political Prisoner exhibition, the AIA’s newsletter ran a piece by the sculptor László “Peter” Peri disputing the show’s moral assumptions. Crime was often relative, he began, a slippery matter of politics. Hadn’t Hitler been a political prisoner? Were Western Europeans imposing their values on new kinds of communist societies? “Our sympathies with people who have lost their lives or given their liberty for their political aims depend on our attitude to their political aims,” Peri went on, so if the law had been broken perhaps the offenders were legitimate prisoners. Squabbles over artistic style were distracting, he continued, the issue was who qualified as a victim: “It is very seldom that anybody, even in the past, was called a political prisoner in the country, and at the time, of his imprisonment.”

London’s Daily Worker was not so circumspect. Like the media generally, this organ of the British Communist Party criticised the exhibition for favouring a style of sculpture that “has no meaning for the public”, and chastised the winner for “insulting both taste and intelligence with a bundle of twisted wire”. The newspaper further saw the project as a slight against the USSR, and, learning the source of funds, adopted a stance habitually taken on divisive matters: “The Unknown Political Prisoner competition resolved itself into an American attempt to...
embroil sculptors in the Cold War.”

What most stirred the art scene was a disparaging piece in the *New Statesman* by John Berger, one of the AIA’s voices against abstraction. Already on his way to earning a reputation as the leading Marxist art reviewer, Berger used his newspaper column to query changing values (he would famously write that through Jackson Pollock “one can see the disintegration of our culture”).

Berger stressed the pointlessness of entries which did not connect with the prize’s guiding theme. For him the show was “a total failure” because much sculpture tried to be apolitical: “All works of art, within their immediate context, are bound to directly or indirectly be weapons …” Besides, Berger went on, in choosing to submit abstractions, the artists themselves had “alienated the public”. Lamenting a lack of overtly politicised figurative art, he said the contest had “failed to inspire a single important work”, and instead “encouraged the most hapless, aimless and … inevitably reactionary type of work”. Having called the winning piece “an emblem of defeat”, Berger finished with a verdict that the exhibition confirmed “the ‘official’ modern art of the West is now bankrupt”.

There was a quick response from the ICA. Within days a letter from Herbert Read appeared in the *New Statesman*. He felt the issue with hecklers like Berger was symptomatic of communists: they would not accept that the competition had been held in good faith. Worse still, underpinning their tiresome complaints was a constricted idea of what art ought to be:

> If we tear aside Mr Berger’s camouflage we find him saying quite bluntly, like his colleagues in Russia, that art must be illustrative (because only illustrations appeal to the mass of the people) and that such should illustrate the passions, the hatreds, the aspirations generated by the social struggle.

In that single sentence Read raised the topic many were gingerly avoiding: if complaints were to be aired about staid official styles, where did that put the Soviets?

Over in Berlin the Russians had been erecting monuments for years. They were quick off the mark, too. Work on the first, a memorial to those Red Army troops lost when storming the city in spring 1945, had commenced within weeks of the war’s end.

That initial month of occupation had seen East Berlin transformed. Even as the British, American and French occupation authorities set about cleaning and rebuilding their sectors of Berlin, the Russians continued to beat, rape and loot in theirs. They also marked it with signs of possession. If residential streets remained as blitzed wastes, Soviet emblems and agitprop banners went up at intersections and along major thoroughfares, and soldiers busily nailed freshly painted red stars and hammer-and-sickle insignias before the ruins of German authority. Then there were the oversize images of the Russian leader. They began appearing in the third week of occupation, starting with a billboard of Stalin’s smirking head, which was stuck in the middle of Unter den Linden outside the shell of the interior ministry.

Next came the permanent monument. The choice location commandeered for the Russians’ audacious memorial was the Tiergarten. A more prominent spot could not have been picked, and the symbolism was right in the faces of the Berliners. Not only was it within the British sector, but the gutted Reichstag was barely fifty metres away against Dorotheenstrasse, eighty metres over to the south rose the shell-pitted face of the Brandenburg Gate (two of its quadriga statues had been destroyed), and beyond one could make out a mound of rubble that was once the Academy of Art. Berliners couldn’t miss it. After all, the monument’s position was within sight of a black market that openly ran on the park’s north-eastern edge in the war’s aftermath.

Bulldozers prepared the muddy ground, then masons appeared and, over summer and autumn 1945, up went a massive curving granite stoa. Positioned in the centre upon a rising plinth was a bronze statue of a burly Russian soldier marching forward, bayonet fixed on rifle, that beggared belief: at nearly four times life size, the stern figure by Vladimir Tsigal and Lev Kerbel was immense. This was a clear demonstration of physical might. To approach it was (and still is) an unsettling, even threatening experience, because the viewer feels puny beneath this grim uniformed colossus—the prototype for numerous Patriotic War monuments across the Soviet Union and its satellites.

Berliners loathed the thing. Before it was finished they had dubbed it “The Unknown Rapist”,
and the painful nickname stuck. Besides, the memorial became an open provocation when the Cold War set in. Even as the Soviet zones of Europe were closed off, the Russians claimed access to the monument for a continuous guard of honour.

The Berlin memorials didn’t halt there. Before 1945 was out the Russians had launched a competition for another monument to the Red Army. Opened in May 1949 and incorporating a military cemetery to the fallen, it replaced an entire park and sports field at Treptower, a south-eastern area of the city. Again the ceremonial focus was a mammoth statue of a Soviet soldier, this time atop a plinth of granite rumoured to be taken from the Reich Chancellery that the Russians were knocking down.35 Seven meters high, the sculpture was titanic. It depicted a stocky soldier standing on a broken swastika as he clutched a medieval sword in one hand and held an infant with the other (he was said to be a Russian sergeant who, under heavy SS machine-gun fire, rescued a three-year-old German girl). Berliners called the cemetery and memorial “The Tomb of the Unknown Rapist”.

Soon up went a third Soviet monument, again commemorating the Battle of Berlin. This memorial replaced the former Schönholzer Heide labour camp at Palkow, in north-eastern Berlin. Finished in November 1949, it included another military cemetery, used more stone from the Reich Chancellery, and featured a hulking bronze of Mother Russia grieving for her deceased sons.

These three enormous memorials explain why West Berlin’s mayor Ernest Reuter was eager to have The Unknown Political Prisoner monument. It would be a modern piece to rub in the face of Alexander Dymshitz, the Soviet officer who regulated culture in East Germany. In 1949 Dymshitz had called abstraction “a typical expression of the bourgeois decadence that is threatening to degenerate art”. Which is probably why Reuter wanted to put Butler’s piece in the northern district of Wedding on a hill overlooking East Berlin—a more incendiary location could not be envisaged.

Wedding, a jumble of war-damaged stucco tenements, was once a communist stronghold and the scene of clashes between Brown Shirts and the Red Front. The most notorious occurred in a shabby little place on Müllerstrasse, Pharus Hall, where the Nazis held a rally one foggy evening in 1927. The ensuing brawl made national headlines, and has been mythologised as a momentous event: Wedding was where the comrades’ fight against Nazism began. Erecting Butler’s abstraction in this symbolically charged district, where it would rise nearly 200 feet, would annoy the Soviets in perpetuity.

Art history has not been kind to the Unknown Political Prisoner competition. The event is frowned on by British scholars as a low point where shady powers tried to entice artists into producing Cold War propaganda. Communist countries are said to have been excluded from competing; the award is cast as being covertly engineered by the Central Intelligence Agency; the show’s sponsor Jock Whitney is painted as working for concealed American interests.

The recurring claim that communist countries were banned from the competition is disingenuous. Yes, records show the ICA’s jury did disallow a Soviet-style maquette officially submitted by the Hungarian government, the sole entry from an Eastern bloc country. But the real culprit throughout was the Cominform. It prevented individual artists behind the Iron Curtain from competing for the prize, prohibited national heats, and barred personal entries. The ICA had also invited onto the jury the art historian Vladimir Kemenov, deputy head of the Soviet Culture Ministry and former chair of VOKS (the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries). He declined, making it plain no Soviet official would participate.

There is no evidence that the CIA, the State Department or any American government body was involved in the competition. Military history presents a strikingly different perspective of the agency and its activities from that assumed by art historians. In 1950, when the idea was first put to Herbert Read and his committee, the CIA had been running only three years. And its performance was so haphazard that General Walter Smith, a hardened Cold Warrior and former US ambassador to the Soviet Union, was about to be appointed as new director to shake up the undeveloped organisation. The CIA lacked the sophistication to conceive of a propaganda project like the Unknown Political Prisoner monument—such initiatives would commence in the mid-1950s under its third director, Allen Dulles, with his broadly-based Operation Mockingbird.

A similar question mark hangs over allegations against the prize’s sponsor Jock Whitney. The Battle for Realism, James Hyman’s authoritative study of the period, describes the philanthropist as “closely involved with the CIA”. The sources cited do not show this. Hyman is not alone here, for most British scholars who have written on the competition likewise cast Whitney as a conduit funnelling CIA money into art, and cite the same inconclusive sources.

Due mostly to his lucrative investment firm J.H. Whitney & Company—the business that coined the term “venture capital”—Jock Whitney was one
of the richest men in postwar America. Modern art was his personal enthusiasm. Besides his own collecting, Whitney had been a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art since the 1930s, serving as chair of the board from 1946. MoMA ranked him as one of its four main benefactors in the postwar period (the others were his friends Nelson and David Rockefeller, and the CBS president William Paley). On the sage advice of Alfred Barr, Whitney was prepared to fund challenging projects at this time. And correspondence between Whitney, Barr and Herbert Read survives which shows the three were privately discussing arrangements for the Unknown Political Prisoner sculpture. As for assertions that Whitney was acting for the CIA, a decade after the competition he was involved with America’s propaganda effort and the board of Radio Free Europe, presumably to boost his political and diplomatic ambitions (he became America’s ambassador to Britain). But, in 1951, that was still years ahead.

The present orthodoxy on The Unknown Political Prisoner competition is a conspiracy theory. It relies on a fug of hearsay where academics cite each other, no one offers solid evidence, and a manifest tirade in a Communist Party newspaper, the Daily Worker, becomes a trusted source. This theory also omits the impact of those Soviet sculptural monuments that, starting in East Berlin, were being imposed across the Eastern bloc. But what is especially misleading about the view is how it misrepresents America as the protagonist, and Britain as a blameless participant in a cultural Cold War. Academics repeatedly skip over Britain’s conscious use of modern sculpture to sow favourable perceptions abroad.

Henry Moore did not enter competitions. They were professionally harmful: not taking first prize damaged a leading artist’s standing, and it was not seemly to compete with lesser figures. But even if he had no intention of entering, Moore had talked the Institute of Contemporary Art into taking on the Unknown Political Prisoner project, served on its organising committee, judged heats in Belgium and the Netherlands, and spruiked for it constantly. He was also a Tate Gallery trustee, acquaintance of most of the judges, knew the American donor, and the winning artist, Reg Butler, had assisted in Moore’s studio. His fingerprints were over the entire venture.

Moore had been the public face of British modern art for nearly a decade. His fame pivoted on the popularity of his wartime drawings of families sheltering from the blitz in London’s underground. They lead in turn to a sequence of sculpture commissions in a related style: the Northampton Madonna & Child (1943–44), the Dartington Hall Figure (1945–46), the Battersea Park Three Standing Figures (1947–48), the Claydon Madonna (1948), and the Hertfordshire Family Group (1948–49). These large figures mostly in stone—of mothers with infants, plump earthy females, young families—encapsulated the yearnings of the moment. Moore’s ample, bosomy, nurturing women were the comforting response to a world stressed and hurting from years of war. His art was perceived as progressive and deeply humanitarian.

Renown at home fuelled promotion abroad. A Henry Moore exhibition was arranged for New York in 1940, going on to Chicago and San Francisco. A condensed version of this show was then dispatched by the British Council to tour Australia’s state galleries. There was a political agenda. The British government was cementing its military victory by exporting culture to former allies—and to conquered nations. Hence, the strange conjunction arranged for the British Pavilion at the reactivated Venice Biennale in 1948. Old Master pictures by Turner hung on the walls, and Moore’s modern sculptures were positioned around the floor, to exemplify an ongoing tradition of great British art. Gossip was rife about diplomatic and political levers being pulled when Moore won Venice’s cherished medal for contemporary sculpture.

There is no disputing that the British Council used Moore’s art as cultural propaganda. After all, the council was founded by the Foreign Office in 1934 to promote British interests in a deteriorating political climate. Besides sponsoring the study abroad of the English language and literature, it had organised tours of musical and theatre troupes, distinguished lecturers and exhibitions. Having languished during the war when the Ministry for Information handled these activities, the British Council moved back into action with the liberation of Paris. Culture now followed the British army across what had been Occupied Europe—beginning
with tours by T.S. Eliot, Julian Huxley, the Old Vic theatre company, a Turner watercolour show and a small exhibit of recent English art. From Paris the latter show, which included several Moores, had travelled on to cities including Brussels, Amsterdam, Vienna, Prague, Warsaw and Rome.

In 1949 the British Council commandeered a Moore survey of fifty-three sculptures and seventy-three drawings organised by Wakefield Art Gallery in Yorkshire. This bulky exhibition was needed for a triumphal tour of European capitals: Brussels, Paris, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Düsseldorf, Bern and, in revised form, Athens. Not that it was an instant success. With a fiery debate over the Gallery in Yorkshire. This bulky exhibition was a small exhibit of recent English art. From Paris the tours by T.S. Eliot, Julian Huxley, the Old Vic travelled on to cities including Brussels, Amsterdam, Vienna, Prague, Warsaw and Rome.

Henry Moore was a valuable cultural weapon in the Cold War battle for people’s minds as Shakespeare, Margot Fonteyn and Laurence Olivier. How Moore responded to his promotion abroad is skimmed over by historians. His biographer Roger Berthoud writes as if Moore was a tourist happily taking in the sights. The Wakefield show’s curator, Eric Westbrook, who took the survey through Europe, told me a different story. The usually affable Moore was distressed at the evident suffering. Art lovers would arrive eager for their first modern exhibit since the 1930s, then, moved by his Underground drawings, would relate heart-rending tales of Nazi abuses. As the show travelled, Moore kept seeing people starving, living in ruins, destitute and sick. And with Cold War anxieties escalating there were signs of tension, oppression, guns, uniforms, bullies. At one point Moore referred to the new novel by George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four, saying to Westbrook he worried Europe was being driven towards a dystopia.

This is the background to Henry Moore’s gruesome Helmet Head bronzes (1949–50). They revisited sinister ideas for encased heads he had worked up a decade earlier with Spanish Prisoner (lithograph 1939) and The Helmet (lead, 1939–40), his original responses to fascist cruelty. Prompted now by Soviet purges across the Eastern bloc, and panic over the Berlin blockade, the life-size Helmet Heads are the very image of militant monsters without any redeeming humanity. The artist sculpted ugly, quite alien abstract forms—some with insectoid eyes—which he placed inside a smoothly machined thick head covering that is recognisably an amalgam of German, Soviet and American army helmets. These iconic visual metaphors were the bleakest work Moore produced.

Even as the Wakefield survey reached Athens and its final venue in February 1951, the British Council had plans for their star artist. A three-week show of ten sculptures and sixty-eight drawings was lined up for West Berlin later in the year, and would then go on to Vienna. Staging a Henry Moore exhibition in those cities signalled the start of a concerted effort. Having been closed out of Eastern bloc countries for years, the British Council was attentively promoting British culture along the western fringe of the Iron Curtain. So, while London argued about the Unknown Political Prisoner competition, the council had an exhibition of Moore’s abstractions touring through Scandinavia and eight West German cities, including Berlin again. Then the British Council scored a major coup by getting a Moore exhibition to tour behind the Iron Curtain. The host country was Yugoslavia—which was not a Soviet satellite—where in 1955 the large survey notched up a record 45,000 visitors in museums at Zagreb, Belgrade, Ljubljana and Skopje.

Henry Moore’s sculpture set communist audiences thinking about socialist realism, the artistic style imposed by their Russian overlords. Where Soviet sculpture was ominously oversize, Moore worked at a comfortable, human scale. Where communist pieces were modelled to a severe stiffness, his handsome silk-water finish used the natural grain of stone and wood. Where Soviet sculpture was humourless in its literal delivery of political cant, the abstractionist Moore drew on visual metaphor and imaginative association. This peaked in Moore’s reclining figures, those nurturing maternal
women who insistently recalled landscapes or trees. Sometimes the rhythmic play of female body and limbs evoked rolling hills and enclosing valleys; sometimes it suggested swelling bolls and twisting branches. Many communist art lovers admired this frankly sensual, often sexual work of the Yorkshire miner’s son.

Henry Moore responded in his studio to Cold War tensions. Warrior with Shield (1953–54) was sparked by the Berlin uprising; and Falling Warrior (1956–57) by the Hungarian uprising and Suez crisis. These major bronzes are among the few instances when Moore sculpted males; and, despite their titles, neither figure is warrior-like, aggressive, or bears weapons. The sculptures also show Moore presenting his solution to the turbulent debate stirred by the Unknown Political Prisoner competition. Here was abstraction with a humanitarian message and a convincing figurative basis. Even John Berger admitted an admiration for Warrior with Shield.

Both pieces carried a debt to Moore’s time in Athens, where the British Council had flown Moore and his wife Irena in for his travelling exhibition’s opening. Moore used the opportunity to study antiquities, and museum staff indulged their esteemed guest with private viewings and excursions to Delphi, Corinth, Mycenae and Olympia. Greece also put current troubles into perspective for the sculptor: struggle and war were the subject of much classical art, the ruins he visited testifying to centuries of conflict.

Moore’s life-size Warrior with Shield called to mind a time-ravaged Greek antiquity. It represented an unarmed male sitting on a pedestal as if recoiling from attack. The nude figure is missing its left arm, left leg and right foot, thereby resembling a damaged sculpture from an archaeological dig. These physical absences also suggested combat wounds, and the schematised head has been cleft vertically by a sword blow. This maimed figure’s defensive posture is emphasised by having it clutch a round shield which has been beaten and buckled out of shape. Falling Warrior likewise shows a vulnerable male, this time without physical wounds, an ineffective shield now flung to one side. Set just above the ground on a low plinth so that the viewer looks down on this figure, he is shown collapsing in defeat, the floundering victim of an overwhelming force.

If European critics savoured the bronzes, the Soviets were inflexible. This was made abundantly clear when Warrior with Shield was included in a special museum viewing for a Russian delegation visiting Britain. They detested the anti-war sculpture, and said so.

The Unknown Political Prisoner monument was never erected. The mayor of West Berlin, Ernst Reuter, died of a heart attack several months after the London exhibition, and no one in the city was keen to continue. There was a tangled exchange of letters between Reg Butler, Herbert Read, Alfred Barr and Jock Whitney over how to proceed.

Then came June 16, 1953, the day when workers constructing a roadway through East Berlin downed tools and held a protest march along Stalinallee, triggering a widespread uprising. East Germans were fed up—with “Sovietisation”, with political repression, rising prices, higher taxes, the unpaid increase in work quotas. So they made a stand. Police reprisals followed, which proved ineffectual, then the Russian army appeared with tanks. Given this situation, no authority in West Berlin would provoke the GDR and its Soviet masters by installing Butler’s monument.

Henry Moore continued to embody British culture on the international stage. Powerful vested interests protected him and it was imprudent to cast doubt. “When I reviewed an exhibition of Henry Moore,” one critic recalled, “arguing that it revealed a falling-off from his earlier achievements, the British Council actually telephoned the artist to apologize for such a regrettable thing having occurred in London.” High-level diplomatic strings were tweaked in 1955 to ensure Moore—who had just been made a Companion of Honour by the Queen—got a coveted commission for UNESCO’s Paris head office. He was asked to sculpt an immense reclining woman as the focal point for the new building’s forecourt. UNESCO’s exalted values were to be symbolised by Moore’s corpulent abstraction. The European art scene was incredulous. Mr Modern Art himself, Pablo Picasso, had received a lesser project inside the building.

Then, finally, there was László Szilvassy, the man who vandalised the winning entry in the Tate Gallery. He had four court appearances over the incident and spent four weeks on remand in Brixton jail. Eventually he was fined ten guineas plus costs. In a curious end to its venture into Cold War politics, London’s Institute of Contemporary Art had prosecuted a refugee from communism.

Christopher Heathcote contributed “Kenneth Clark and the Exodus of the Modernists” in the June 2013 issue. A footnoted version of this article appears on Quadrant Online.
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