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Anne Deighton. "Don and diplomat: Isaiah Berlin and Britain's early Cold War." *Cold War History* 13:4 (November 2013): 525-540. DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2013.773213.
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Reviewed by **Mark Gilbert**, SAIS Europe

Anne Deighton has written a very interesting article about Sir Isaiah Berlin's role as a "man who both reflected and also influenced the cultural positioning of the UK as Atlanticist and anti-communist" in the immediate postwar years (527). Berlin is, of course, well known as an important scholar of the history of ideas, and as an original political thinker whose work reshaped contemporary liberalism. Deighton makes an excellent case for seeing him as a Cold warrior, too.

Deighton's argument, in essence, is that Berlin's Atlanticism was the product of two key personal experiences. Berlin's highly successful role as a political officer in the Washington embassy during the Second World War was "clearly instrumental in the shaping of his personal contacts in America, and his pro-American outlook" (529). By contrast, his extended visit to the USSR in the fall and winter of 1945, during which he famously met the Russian poetess Anna Akhmatova in Leningrad, left him filled with distaste for a dictatorship that had "swept away the Russian culture that he knew and loved" (534). While in the USSR, Berlin wrote a long "Note on Literature and Arts in the Russian Soviet Federated Republic in the closing months of 1945," which Deighton considers "a cultural equivalent of Kennan's long telegram in terms of its assessment of the Soviet Union" (532). She rightly cites its conclusion that "Leninist policy" would sacrifice all civil and intellectual liberty to the cause of making the "dark mass" of Tsarist Russia's "semi-barbarous helots" into "full human beings," though she does not point out that the nub of Berlin's argument in "Two Concepts of Liberty" is implicit in it (533).

Deighton adds an extra twist to her tale by interpreting Berlin as a progenitor of a cast of mind that subsequently isolated the UK from the process of European integration. He ignored the "federalist, functionalist or integrationist thinking that many elites on

the European mainland were pursuing in their quest to rebuild Europe after the war” and in March 1948, in the wake of British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin’s “Western Union” speech, he answered a specific Foreign Office request for a “brief on the ‘spiritual cement’ which binds, or should bind, the countries of Western Europe” with a degree of disdain (535). Other academics were far more forthcoming with useful suggestions. Berlin’s dislike, as a committed Zionist, of Ernest Bevin may have been responsible for his lack of public spirit in this case, but Deighton thinks that the most likely explanation for his diffidence toward the Foreign Office’s request was that it “was not couched in Atlanticist terms” (536).

As the Anglo-American relationship solidified in 1949-1950, Berlin became a “willing commentator and indeed protagonist” in the “new cultural Cold War.” He was much “sought after” as an expert on the USSR, he wrote for *Foreign Affairs*, gave lectures at Chatham House, and broadcast regularly (538). While he was not a high profile ‘Cold Warrior’ like Arthur Koestler or Raymond Aron, Berlin had contacts with British decision-makers that “were nevertheless profound and important,” and his essays “reinforced the hard-edged, Anglo-American thrust of Western Cold War politics” (539). There is “no evidence,” Deighton argues, that his work was “knowingly funded” by the CIA, but Berlin would not have minded if it had been. He was “completely comfortable” with the epithet of “Cold War intellectual” (539). Indeed, Deighton asserts in her conclusion, Berlin was “an iconic part of British Atlanticism” and the cultural Cold War in Britain “cannot begin to be understood without consideration of his place in it, a siren voice speaking to, and with power, from the safety of academia, while keeping his distance of the rough and tumble of day to day politics” (540).

All this is broadly true, well said, and well worth saying. I will limit myself to two points of interpretation. The first is that Deighton comes close to arguing that who Berlin knew (and the fact that he knew almost everybody) was as important to his rise to fame as the actual content of what he had to say. This might be a misreading, but I still think the essay needed greater analysis of the ideas in Berlin’s early Cold-War writings and broadcasts, and of the tone of their reception. His BBC lectures on “Freedom and Its Betrayal,” for instance, between October-December 1952 evoked a *Times* leader and much public discussion. As it is, Deighton mentions (but does not dissect) only the brilliant essay “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” which was published in *Foreign Affairs* in its March/April 1950 edition to great acclaim. It certainly helped that Berlin had access to top people on both sides of the Atlantic, but they listened to him primarily because what he said seemed a plausible account of the Stalinist menace and the reasons for its existence.

The second point follows from this. Deighton’s picture of Berlin as an “Atlanticist intellectual player” in “what we now think of as the cultural Cold War” is a striking one, but also one that might mislead (537). Before we enlist Berlin as a staff officer alongside colonels such as Melvin Lasky and Irving Kristol – and though I do not think this is Deighton’s intention, there is a risk that the proliferating hordes of scholars working on

the cultural Cold War will ‘map’ Berlin in this way as a result of this article – we should remember that Berlin’s work was primarily important for the light it shed on the trends in political thought that had made totalitarianism, both Soviet and Nazi, possible. Deighton ably shows us that Berlin, far from being an ivory tower academic, was crucially important in framing the case for Atlanticism. This should not, however, be taken to mean that the lectures and articles he wrote in this period can be *reduced* to their political utility. The distinction is an important one.

Mark Gilbert is resident professor of history and international relations at SAIS Europe, the Bologna Center of the School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University. He is concluding a short general history of Cold War Europe. He teaches a course called “Intellectuals and Politics.”

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