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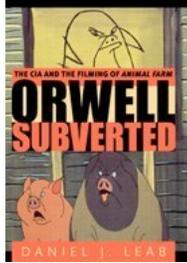
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Fred Patten Reviews: Orwell Subverted: The CIA and the Filming of Animal Farm

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Orwell Subverted: The CIA and the Filming of Animal Farm
 Author: Daniel J. Leab
 Publisher: The Pennsylvania State University Press
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George Orwell's Animal Farm, the famous allegory about British farm animals whose attempt to create a republic based on animal equality is subverted by the pigs – "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" – became an instant literary classic in 1945. In 1954 it became the first British animated feature film.

There was gossip at the time that the movie could never have been made if America's Central Intelligence Agency had not financed it. But the CIA stonewalled all requests for information, and those involved with the film refused to talk about it. The big question of scholars was whether the CIA simply provided money or exerted any editorial control over it. Were the Animal Farm film's differences from Orwell's book due to normal movie-studio rewriting, or did the CIA dictate the changes?

After fifty years, the CIA still refuses to release information, but many of the principals have died and their papers are now available. Professor of history Daniel Leab, who has written several books on World War II and Cold War espionage and propaganda, has spent years interviewing those involved with the filming and studying their papers, including fifty boxes of producer Louis de Rochemont's uncataloged records at the American Heritage Center made available for research in 2004. This book is not only an in-depth study of the production of Britain's first animated feature, but is a fascinating "warts and all" description of how the American and British governments tried to manipulate public opinion, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, during the 1950s.

Leab shows that making Animal Farm into a movie became a CIA project in 1950, with de Rochemont as producer because he had made several anti-Nazi and anti-Communist espionage dramas with FBI cooperation during the 1940s. De Rochemont, with the CIA's approval, picked the British husband-wife animation studio of Halas & Batchelor to produce the film; it was never an independent movie production taken over by the CIA. "The financiers" requested script changes from the start, to turn Orwell's allegory of a successful Socialist revolution perverted by a tyrannical ruling clique, into a strident sermon that Communism was inherently evil. Halas & Batchelor rejected some overly-blatant requests, such as giving the pig Napoleon a Stalinist pipe and moustache, but accepted those that were more subtle yet turned the story into strident anti-Communist propaganda. The biggest change, the ending where the other animals rise up to overthrow their pig oppressors, was indeed demanded by the CIA (it hoped to incite audiences in Eastern Europe to revolt against their Communist governments), but Halas & Batchelor had decided on their own that a more upbeat climax than Orwell's bleak ending was needed to make the film commercially successful. Most critics agreed upon the film's release.

So the CIA did finance Animal Farm, and did try with some success to make it more blatant propaganda than it might have been otherwise; but on the whole the finished film was pretty much as it would have been without the "investors" politically-motivated revisions. Leab buttresses his findings with almost fifty pages of academic notes and bibliographies.

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