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## Picturing “the World Abroad”: Official Domestic Propaganda in Czechoslovakia 1956–1962

The historical consciousness of the Czechoslovak population for the period from 1956 to 1962 can be characterized as amorphous and vague. Political life, heavily influenced by the violent communist takeover, stabilized relatively after Stalin’s death. Internal reform movements, which at the end of the sixties led to attempts to change the political system and to the consequent invasion by the Warsaw Pact armies, were still in their beginnings. Collective memory is more sensitive to clear turning points, of which there were none thanks to the successful efforts in those years by the Czechoslovak state to dampen internal politics.

Developments outside Czechoslovakia were diametrically opposed, with several important “historical moments” in neighboring countries. These included the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, Polish unrest, the Hungarian uprising, the escalation of tensions in Berlin, and the Soviet-American summit in Vienna. The more distant world was also changing: de-colonization in Africa, China’s search for an independent political line, and pan-Arabism. The relations of the superpowers underwent a remarkable transformation as well. At the beginning of our period, the USSR announced its desire for peaceful coexistence, whereas at the end it was building nuclear bases in Cuba. Where Soviet and American leaders had earlier passed political messages to each other exclusively via speeches to their own populations and the rhetoric of their UN-delegates – so at least it seemed to the public –, the Cuban missile crisis brought about the new “hotline” telephone. Their competition in space further reduced in their eyes the importance of other countries and the superpowers became competing “partners” in world politics. Thus, even if Czechoslovak rulers managed to keep a lid on developments in their own state, they nevertheless had – at least in a passive way – to interpret the outside world in a politically suitable way for their citizens.

Propagandists shaping public opinion on international politics, as opposed to domestic affairs, had one substantial advantage. In following the internal political development, they could not avoid formulations that presented even less thoughtful readers with the dilemma of whether to believe

the newspaper or their own eyes. Thanks to the very limited possibility of travel abroad, however, ordinary citizens had much less chance to compare official information with personal experience. This applied not only to the Western bloc. Free and unlimited travel (and the distribution of press) was not allowed even within other countries ruled by communist parties. The official Czechoslovak media thus had not only the chance to “correct” and deform the picture of the world abroad, but also, for a substantial part of the population, directly to create the required opinion. The measure of its success depended on the technical possibilities available for denying the citizenry access to alternative sources of information, on the professional abilities of the creators and manipulators of public opinion, and on the quality of their propagandist product<sup>1</sup>.

#### PROPAGANDA CONTENT

The picture of the world offered to recipients of communist propaganda was meant to enable the masses “to take the right standpoint”<sup>2</sup>. The formulations always hinted at the correct answer to the question of “which side we should stand on”. Clues were found both in the aesthetic criteria of the “heroes” and in their regular attributes. Thus, the enemy was usually fat, ugly, aggressive, and sneaky. The problems with picturing enemies of different nations were solved by attaching to them flags, money, dresses, caps, helmets, and symbolic animals. The counterbalance was the “victims”: determined communists; tired, exploited workers, and the thin and hungry unemployed.

In written text, the clues were more differentiated. Key elements included the unity of opinion (“everybody agrees that”), moral and historical

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<sup>1</sup> The research was supported by the Center of Excellence of the Slovak Academy of Sciences: “Collective Identities in Modern Societies. Central European Region”. The study concentrates exclusively on propaganda aimed at the Czechoslovak population. It does not deal with the external propaganda produced by Czechoslovakia for its neighbors (e.g. Hungary in 1956) or Western communists or countries of the Third World. For more on these types of propaganda, see: Ladislav Bittman, *Mezinárodní dezinformace, černá propaganda, aktivní opatření a tajné akce* [International disinformation, black propaganda, active measures and secret actions] (Praha 2000).

<sup>2</sup> “The first task of the satirical journal is the education of its readers in the spirit of socialism. Implementation of this rule demands of the editors of ‘Roháč’ [the only Slovak satirical weekly which was formally run by the trade unions] clarity of political aim.” Slovenský národný archív [Slovak National Archives, Bratislava] (SNA), ÚV KSS [Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia], Sekretariát, 682/58, Declaration from the 27<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia, point: Evaluation of the journal “Roháč”, 19 December 1958.

justification (“the historical advantages of”), the inferiority of the enemy, terminological dichotomies (*špión – rozviedčik*), and explanations of proper understanding, etc.

As important as “how to speak about the world” was the question of “what to tell the people about it”. The picture of the world projected by propagandists in the observed period was based on the bipolar world, with the plusses connected to the USSR and its satellites, and the negatives to the West. In the following remarks, we will deal with a few particular topics of propaganda that underwent remarkable development.

### USSR

For a short period from the middle of the fifties, the USSR stopped presenting itself as a “country of the most developed science and technology” and proclaimed a shift to “following the best patterns” and “learning” from abroad in individual areas of science and technology<sup>3</sup>. In the speeches he made during his visits in other countries, N. S. Khrushchev increasingly recalled the important role played by visiting engineers and other specialists in the newly-born Soviet state. He emphasized his will to continue this tradition<sup>4</sup>.

The landmark in rhetoric on the exchange of information between countries was the success of the Soviet space program. The space triad Sputnik-Gagarin-Titov enabled Soviet politicians to present themselves – even in technology – as partners superior to the USA. The combination of Soviet success and official secrecy about Soviet failures led both to false evaluations and to caricatures of the known, unsuccessful attempt at space flight by the Americans.

Despite its occasional rhetoric about what had been achieved by foreign technology, the USSR remained in its own words, and in the words of its satellites, unique and a pioneer in the area of culture. Its successes included not only the education of outstanding artists, objectively its most successful export article, but also the achieved level of “culture” of the masses. The older literary heroes, such as the uncle of Timur the pioneer, a factory worker who used to sing in the factory opera, were replaced by

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<sup>3</sup> Anastas I. Mikoian, Speech at the XX<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU, February 1956.

<sup>4</sup> “Ford helped us to build the automobile factory in the town of Gorky. The outstanding American specialist Cooper was our advisor when building the water power station on the Dnieper River, which was in its time the greatest in the world. Your engineers helped us to build tractor factories in Stalingrad and Kharkov. Americans and Britons advised on the Moscow metro. We were grateful to your specialists.” Lecture in the Economic Club, New York, 7 September 1960, in: Nikita S. Chruščov, *Svět beze zbraní, svět bez válek* [World without Arms, World without Wars] 2 (Praha 1961) 132.

kolkhozniks conveying a piano to a kolkhoz, or by a young librarian who wants her library stuffed with Marxist classics to be nearer and more accessible to young builders in Siberia.

Great emphasis was put on reporting the general cultural development of the small nations in the Asian part of the USSR, which counterbalanced information on the oppression and assimilation of nations colonized by the West. However, the patronizing attitude towards the local peoples and the propagandistic consciousness of the Soviet missionary task was not much different from Western notions of the civilizing mission of Europe in the rest of the world (“the white man’s burden”). The success of the Soviet mission was furthermore presented as limitless. According to a news report, Soviet power gave the nomadic Karagashi nation on the steppe not only “little houses”, but even enabled it actually to “become humans”. Though they still roamed during part of the year, their cultural development was allegedly documented by a group-photo in front of a large tent with the subtitle: “The house of culture is replaced in the wilderness by a Red tent.”<sup>5</sup>

#### THE GERMAN FACTOR

The German factor remained a constant problem in the eyes of propagandists. Here, they were furthermore not operating in a vacuum; on the contrary, a large part of the Czechoslovak population had fixed views of the Germans dating from the Second World War. An effort was made by the propaganda to make people believe that all “bad” Germans had moved to the West, where they could continue to be hated. At the same time, media propagated a completely different picture of the East Germans. One nice example of such propaganda concerned the problem of German rearmament. The Czechoslovak population had initially been told that the Germans would not have an army. But then they did rearm. From then on, Czechoslovak information negatively linked the West German army with “general conscription”, while the East German army was said to be “selective”, “consisting exclusively of the best sons of the working people”. The East Germans caused further problems for Czechoslovak propaganda with the cut and color of their uniforms. To avoid any resemblance to the Hitler’s Wehrmacht, the West German army had modernized its uniform and adopted features of the US (democratic) army. But the East German military was dressed almost as before, evoking very vivid negative recollections among many Czechoslovaks and causing a number of protests and explana-

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<sup>5</sup> Čierne husi (Karagaši) sa stali ľuďmi [The Black Geese, Karagashi, Became Humans], in: *Svet socializmu* 20 (1957) 7.

tions both in regional newspapers and in the central press. But even here the propagandists managed to produce an ideologically acceptable version: “Whereas the Western German army is symptomatically dressed in uniforms of the US [i.e., “imperialist”] pattern, the uniforms of the people’s army of East Germany keep the traditional [i.e. “decent”] grey color of German uniforms.”<sup>6</sup>

#### THE CLASS ENEMY

Deviation from the dogmatist approach to the class enemy can be observed on two fronts. The first was the change of policy towards European leftist organizations outside the Soviet bloc. The Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party opened the door to collaboration with those “progressive forces of the West” with a “different opinion on the path to socialism” than that of the USSR, and “cordially greeted” the social democrats. On the platform of the “fight for peace”, brotherly greetings were later even sent to “progressive” representatives of other social organizations, including churches.

The second area where the approach to the class enemy had to be amended was the decolonization of Africa and Asia. With regard to the dialectic of development, the previously a priori negative “bourgeoisie” became – against the background of backward feudal Africa – actually the *progressive* bourgeoisie. For example, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana was pictured as a representative of the “young progressive bourgeoisie that agreed with selected ideas of socialism”<sup>7</sup>.

#### THE THIRD WORLD

Representatives of the Third World also caused another kind of problem: official propaganda already included the stereotype of an oppressed black or Arab. Especially after the Suez crisis, a black man of northern African appearance, tall, straight, in white blouse and trousers, came to act – in addition to the black “noble savage” hero – as a representative figure. Members of other oppressed nations, such as Laotians, Chinese, and some Vietnamese, were also portrayed with aesthetic and symmetrical figures. But the stereotypes of the good black (tall, strong, tearing chains) and the bad white lord ceased to function in situations where native representatives of former colonies decided to orient themselves towards their former mother countries or the USA. Selected African politicians, such as “the separatist

<sup>6</sup> Život strany 6 (1956) 41f.

<sup>7</sup> Svet socializmu 11 (1957) 7.

Tshombe” or “the betrayer Kasavubu”, thus acquired bodily defects and were described with impertinent adjectives. They resembled pagan cannibals cooking poor missionaries in a cauldron. “Bad” blacks were dwarfish, with a wild look in their eyes and massive mouths. It looked as if thousands of athletes of the Bantu tribe were betrayed by a handful of scoliotic Pygmies. On the other hand, Arab “traitors” were usually distinguished by big bellies, awkward looks, and symbols of wealth. The use of Julius Streicher-like racist motives can also be observed in commentary on developments in Asia. Regarding the conflict between China and Taiwan, the faces of Taiwanese emigrants resembled the “yellow peril”, while the continental Chinese are mild, good-looking, and tall. Enemies such as Syngman Rhee, Vietnamese allies of the West, or Japanese Prime Minister Kishi suffered from physical deformation.

The rule of non-portrayal of friends in caricature should also be mentioned in this context. A capitalist politician was never seen with his socialist counterpart. Portrayal of allied statesmen was strictly forbidden<sup>8</sup>. Comparison was handled exclusively with the use of symbols and attributes. A special rule was applied to politicians of the Third World friendly to the USSR. The figures of Patrice Lumumba and Antoine Ginzenga were the most frequent. Their caricatures were only allowed as long as they remained in the category of sympathizers. When they definitely “joined” the socialist camp, their portraits became forbidden, as those of other allied politicians were. This practice can also be observed with respect to Fidel Castro’s pictures. In the Khrushchev era, even those “socialist” politicians in open conflict with the USSR were quite interestingly never pictured, even though they were unfavorably described in print. Thus, from 1956 to 1962 there were no pictures of Tito, Enver Hoxha, or Mao.

#### UNRELIABLE PROLETARIAT OF ALL COUNTRIES

The last category of propaganda whose development we will trace is that represented by the unreliable proletariat of all countries. The theory of the superiority of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, which implied its inevitable final global victory, formed a cornerstone of the ideology of the countries of the socialist camp. But practice had differed from theory from the very beginning. After World War II, no one expected the early Marxists’ “most developed and conscious” proletariat – that in Germany – to carry out a socialist revolution anymore. Otherwise, Communist regimes came to power only in those countries where the Red Army was located at least temporarily.

<sup>8</sup> The only, strictly limited, and short-term exception was the person of N. S. Khrushchev himself, namely during his meeting with J. F. Kennedy. Paradoxically, despite this case, there were never any portraits of Czechoslovak representatives in the local press.

Even the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party confirmed that the expected “growth of revolutionary activity of the masses in proportion to the growth of their pauperization” had not become reality. But there was still an official expectation, or dogma, that the idea of Communist revolution would be adopted by every proletarian, every individual of the exploited masses, to whom it could be introduced. It was expected that the corrections to the political line after Stalin’s death, such as abandoning the cult of personality, dogmatism, schematism, and formalism, would facilitate and speed up the spread of the idea of building a communist society. Instead, however, signs of its weakening, deterioration and disintegration were evident even inside the socialist camp. The propagandists thus faced still more difficult problems.

The German unrest in 1953 was partly kept secret and partly explained as the activities of the remnants of fascism. The street violence in Poland in 1956 also remained mostly unreported and was later presented as the result of foreign intelligence, local hooligans, and rotten youth. The uprising in Hungary was initially treated the same way, but its scale demanded correction of this interpretation. Imperialist agents and Horthy’s emigrants were mentioned, but it was also admitted that “demagogy in the recent past had influenced and led astray a substantial part of the population”. The term *Republikflucht* – the flight of East German citizens led astray by the Western propaganda – was also found in the newspapers of the time, which reported the problem as “not fully solved up till now”<sup>9</sup>. The propagandists agreed that “at first sight the wages and prices [in West Germany] look more advantageous than in East Germany. But stability of employment, social and cultural advantages, and moreover, the perspectives of working people lead many to decide for moving to East Germany.” But why were not all working people of East Germany convinced of their advantages? Why it was so easy to lead the Poles and Hungarians astray? How could the need for the still more perfect isolation of the inhabitants of the socialist countries from Western propaganda (and Western reality) be justified? For Czechoslovak propaganda, these questions represented an insoluble problem. The approach was sometimes to proclaim the disinterest of the citizenry in such topics, which at other times were simply ignored.

#### THE PROBLEM OF UNFORESEEN DEVELOPMENTS

The communist system of power, including the propaganda machinery, was strictly centralized, centrally controlled, and heavily dependent on

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<sup>9</sup> Rozštiepená krajina a Nemecko budúcnosti [The Divided Country and Germany of the Future], in: Pravda, 7 October 1956.

planning, which was applied not only to industry. Newspapers were also filled according to plan and a priori censorship required that articles had to be ready for checking a long time in advance.

However, world events did not follow the directives of Czechoslovak communists. In the autumn of 1956, some Hungarian comrades became “imperialist agents” almost overnight. In 1962, information about the existence of the nuclear bases on Cuba, previously denied, became public and official in a few days. The propagandists were thus not able to anticipate which approach towards current brothers from other communist parties would be valid the following day. A *modus vivendi* with Yugoslavia was gradually found. It was difficult both to criticize and not to offend China. Between 1959 and 1962, the Albanians went from being comrades to people who “with growing blindness and lack of judgment worsened their situation by slanderous offences and supporting nationalism and sectarianism”<sup>10</sup>.

It was difficult to explain to the Czechoslovak citizenry the rank and file in the capitalist countries, their workers and exploited. Attempts to do so, guided by strict directives on how to report and what to avoid, came periodically during German, French, British, and American election campaigns. When the newspapers portrayed the Western workers too frequently as politically conscious – organizing demonstrations against revanchism or militarism – it became harder to explain why they took part in elections and voted for “new Führers such as Adenauer”.

#### INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

The trends and changes in propaganda during the period under consideration were followed the gradual institutionalization of propaganda. Before Stalin’s death, foreign propaganda was paradoxically less institutionalized. The Czechoslovak press simply waited for the press releases of TASS<sup>11</sup>. In the second half of the fifties, even the greatest willingness to follow the Soviet political and propagandist line failed due to its changeability. Up to 1956, the apparent need for greater flexibility and independence of the satellite political elites, including propagandists and journalists, increased. That demanded a widening of the group of “chosen” persons with access to secret information on real foreign-political developments. In addition, the world became larger once Czechoslovak propaganda started dealing with the African states. The decisive step towards the reorganization of foreign-propaganda production was finally made in the autumn of 1956.

<sup>10</sup> Státní ústřední archiv [The State Central Archives of the Czech Republic, Prague] (SUA), 014/14, sv. 6, a.j. 10, Bulletin, č.6, 1961, 29 December 1962.

<sup>11</sup> The state-controlled press agency of the Soviet Union.

The turbulent events in Poland, Hungary, and at the Suez Canal led to the foundation of regular weekly press-conferences (actually lectures) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where the chief journalists concerned with foreign news were instructed what to write during the next week<sup>12</sup>.

After 1948, the Communist party secured its control over all published information in the media by the careful choice and placement of loyal journalists. But less than a decade later, even the most conscious and party-minded journalists were not considered capable of analyzing international developments and formulating ready-made views for the masses. The whole process became subject to the Ministry of Foreign Relations.

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<sup>12</sup> Archiv Ministerstva zahraničních věcí České republiky [Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Prague] (AMZV), TO [Territorial department], 6113, 1956–57, č.j. 221.121/56-TO, Zápis z I. konference vedoucích zahraničních rubrik, 3 November 1956.

