



## ANTI-AMERICAN PROPAGANDA IN CZECH BOOK DESIGN 1946–1962

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**T**HE STORY OF Soviet control of the Eastern Bloc, particularly over Czechoslovakia, and communist ideological opposition to the United States and its allies, is reflected in a newly acquired collection of anti-American propaganda published in Prague during the Cold War. The Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library purchased the material from Daniel Morgan Books in 2019. The majority of the sixty publications were issued between 1948, when Soviet operatives executed a coup d'état in Czechoslovakia, and 1953, the year Stalin died. The volumes have been incorporated into the Robert S. Kenny collection on Communism and Radicalism (kenny 04146–04197).

Three years ago, I described for readers of *The Halcyon* the history of translations of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* into eastern European languages (no. 59, June 2017). Orwell used the allegory of the animal farm to criticize American and British concessions which granted the Soviet Union a significant sphere of influence over Eastern Europe at the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences. Orwell also set out to shatter the myth that the Soviet Union was a true socialist society. Soon after the

novel's publication in 1945, the United States enacted the Marshall Plan to halt the spread of communism in Europe. Aside from aid for reconstruction, funds were directed towards a huge information campaign that flooded Europe with books (including translations of *Animal Farm*), magazines, popular music, and film that reflected the best elements of American life.

To counter U.S. ascendancy in Europe, the Soviet Union and its Eastern Bloc allies attacked 'Yankee imperialism' and Wall Street capitalism with the dissemination of propaganda that denigrated their enemy. They characterized the United States as a plundering nation that uses freedom as a cover to hide its rapacity. Howard Zinn writes in *A People's History of the United States* that during the Cold War both countries, the Soviet Union and the United States, went to work, 'under the cover of "socialism" on one side, and "democracy" on the other, to carve out their own empires of influence.'

The collection of anti-American propaganda features original Czech works of fiction and commentary, and translations from Russian, French, and blacklisted American writers, such

as Albert E. Kahn (1912–1979), Albert Maltz (1908–1985), and Howard Fast (1914–2003). The texts, covers, and illustrations target several aspects of American foreign and domestic policy. Several titles equate American military aggression with Nazi Germany, specifically the American occupation of west Bohemia. Other works criticize American militarization and NATO, viewing these developments as a sign of imminent attack on Eastern Europe. Another category of books depicts American society as morally corrupt in its treatment of the working class, minorities (especially African-Americans), and leftist intellectuals (such as the Hollywood Ten). Other areas of American policy denounced by the authors are imperial aggression in the Far East, for example, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, as well as American financial interference in the economic and political affairs of Josip Broz Tito's Yugoslavia.

The most compelling aspect of this propaganda is the use of graphic design on the dust jackets and covers to condemn or mock American policies and society.

Among the more captivating designs are the covers to the mass weekly *Dikobraz* (Porcupine), a satirical magazine published in Prague from

1945 to 1989. The issue for 18 November 1954, for example, features a political cartoon by Bohumil Štěpán (1913–1985) dedicated to Soviet press month. His collage bears the subtitle ‘Truth wins’ and depicts a clipping of the Soviet Communist Party newspaper *Pravda* (Truth), in the shape of a boot, crushing a duck festooned in an American flag. The reference is to the *canard* (i.e. false story) of the featured article in *Pravda* on Soviet-American nuclear arms discussions, in which the Soviets accuse the United States of developing an atomic Marshall Plan.

The caricature by the Soviet political cartoonist Boris Efimov (1900–2008) drives this point home in *Za trvalý mír* (For enduring peace, 1951). He represents Harry S. Truman and Winston Churchill astride a cannon aimed at destroying the peace-loving proletariat walled up behind an impenetrable Iron Curtain.

A similar message of distrust comes across in Adolf Hoffmeister’s cover design for his and Miroslav Galuška’s report on their three months as delegates to the United Nations in New York City from October to December 1950 (*Tři měsíce v New Yorku*, 1951). Hoffmeister (1922–2007) and Galuška (1922–2007) encounter a hostile world that reacts fearfully to communism. To capture the feeling of diplomatic alienation, the artist depicts a

white dove, a symbol of peace, atop a caged eagle, against a blue and white backdrop, the colours evocative of the United Nations, and the eagle in the red birdcage suggestive of an enslaved United States.

Much more sinister is the cover by Josef Prchal (1921–1970) for Jiří Hronek’s *Spoutaná Francie* (Shackled France, 1951), a work about American activities in France following the Second World War. Prchal designed an American octopus that is set to devour the map of France. The illustration, essentially a reworking of a poster printed by the Communist Party of France, with financing from Renault factory workers, conveys a sense of American imperialism. The eyes of the octopus are represented by dollar signs, signifying alleged American obsession with money and materialism. The octopus has long been used in persuasive cartography as a surrogate for rapacious imperialism or the threat to neighbours, with its tentacles grasping for land and power.

Other designs in the collection rely on caricature or comic art to make their point. The cover by Leo Haas (1901–1983) to Antonio Cordon’s *Viděl jsem Titovu zradu* (I saw Tito’s betrayal, 1951) depicts the Yugoslav revolutionary and statesman surreptitiously accepting American dollars, a veiled reference to aid funnelled to Yugoslavia via the Marshall Plan

after that country’s estrangement from the Soviet Union. Tito’s acceptance of loans was portrayed in propaganda as clear bribery and an attempt to force a wedge in the communist alliance through the Balkans.

On the reverse side of American largesse was the decline in living standards for the average American and the effects of warmongering on children, including the fear of nuclear attack and the implementation of mass air-raid drills. For the cover of the Czech translation of Albert E. Kahn’s *Game of Death* (*Hra smrti*, 1955), the artist Ladislav Krám (1925–) chose to reflect the violence of American society with a collage depicting a soldier set against a background of comic book characters and photographs of children, brutally striking or aiming guns at each other.

Not long after the steady stream of anti-American propaganda emanating from Czechoslovakia and the rest of the Soviet bloc, President Truman called for the United States to mount a ‘Campaign of Truth’ to expose communist lies. The United States Information Agency was formed in 1953 during Dwight Eisenhower’s term in office to promote its own ‘public diplomacy.’ The war of information, espousing the merits of democracy and capitalism on the one hand, with the virtues of communism on the other, continued through the end of the Cold War.

