

Political and Social Reflections of the Soviet Bloc in Didacticised Media and History Teaching

Kamil Štěpánek / e-mail: stepanek@ped.muni.cz
Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Czech Republic

Štěpánek, K. (2016). Political and Social Reflections of the Soviet Bloc in Didacticised Media and History Teaching. *Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal*, 8/1, 55–64.

This paper analyses didactic and methodical aspects of the application of visual and audio-visual media in the educational process. It making selective use of media reflecting politico-social phenomena in the Soviet Bloc. It also focuses on posters, postage stamps and television production as historical sources reflecting modern history in particular. On the basis of an the analysis of the topics covered by these media from the Cold War Era, the paper recommends the explanation of both historical phenomena and the mechanisms of propaganda and anti-propaganda in history teaching. The paper also mentions ideological, socialisation and propagandist contexts. The described approach gives rise to an effective alternative educational medium that, first and foremost, reinforces interdisciplinary co-operation between school history and media studies.

Key words: *history teaching; didactics of history; postage stamps; historical film; Soviet Bloc; Cold War; propaganda; media studies*

Introduction

The Cold War – the mutual displays of power in third countries and the building up of atomic arsenals were not the only battlegrounds of the superpowers. The media sphere was not restricted merely to images working explicitly with the tactics of deterrence, since a relatively widespread view prevailed that held that a similar effect could also be achieved in another way. For example, the ambitious economic programme announced in the Soviet Bloc at the end of the nineteen fifties promised to rapidly overtake the USA. It came to be seen, however, that this was mere form without any substance. Nevertheless, the subject matter reflecting this and its staggering abundance in the visual media (posters, postage stamps, etc.) of these uneasy times show the great importance placed on the propaganda of the time on this additional front in the Cold War. Another perspective on politico-social conditions is offered by audio-visual production, and by television in particular.

Attention is focused in the individual sections of this paper on the possible implementation of these communication sources, in particular posters, stamps and television serials, in history teaching no matter whether their theme was a process of integration within the Soviet Bloc, the propaganda of ideas, economic strategy, or models of social structure.

Visual media

The subject matter of the posters or stamps of the Cold War era cannot, of course, be considered a systematic weapon employed by the competing blocs. Nevertheless, their analysis, particularly concerning historical implementation, can provide an untraditional source of information for receptive and productive work in the final year of primary education or at secondary school, for example. The didactic goals of the text argue principally in favour of the use of commemorative postage stamps, although these do not necessarily represent a direct reflection of the events of their time.

The following arguments can be used to support the usefulness of the description and application in teaching work of motifs of the Cold War found in these image media. First and foremost, they give an impression of the official ideology and its interpretation through the mass media. Their analysis can give schoolchildren an insight into the history of the Cold War that they miss out on when examining official (usually text) documents. They can find out for themselves what images of the enemy and what stereotypes in the mass media were intended to shape the attitudes of the population. This approach is even more effective if the children have already come into contact with other visual media with which they can make a comparison. Exposure to new materials can be motivated by the use of the most attractive images, with more active work continuing in group form. Pupils can also come up with their own hypotheses and questions relating to the given motifs, or be led by a system of questions to a the recognition of the stereotypical features of the representation of the enemy – how the enemy is generally defined in pictorial communication, what symbols and characteristics are used to mark him, how “we” and “they” are differentiated, etc.

Areas that do not explicitly express the threat of war have been loosely defined to support thematic teaching work. We will endeavour to consider on a selective basis the attempts at economic integration mentioned in the introduction, linked to economic priorities, the ideological battle and propaganda in the society run by the Communists in the Soviet Bloc. The

blurring of boundaries and frequent intermingling of individual themes cannot be entirely ruled out as they represent typical features of the subject matter under consideration here.

The principal source of iconographic material, in addition to the author's own collection, is comprised of stamp catalogues and posters available on the Internet. This text does not aim to be a complete summary of suitable motifs and their interpretation, but rather a pilot study of didactic interest in the forms of media reflection of a topic of modern historiography as fundamental as the Cold War certainly was.

Interpretation of media motifs can be based on the literature given in the cited study¹, while other titles providing an insight and understanding of the reflected topics may also be recommended².

After the Second World War, a new phenomenon known as integration appeared in the world that was perhaps seen most markedly in Europe. Its causes and individual stages are well described, analysed and interpreted in the extensive specialist literature, and the commensurate attention is also paid to them in history teaching. Certain facts and contexts must, however, be noted when annotating propagandist media production.

The post-war economic isolation of the individual Eastern European countries caused by their non-participation in the Marshall Plan was intended to be compensated for by co-operation with other Communist regimes. It is, nevertheless, no secret that the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance established in Moscow in 1949 represented a centralistic tool used by the Soviet Union to control its satellites. The differences between the two groupings were further intensified by the formation of the EEC in 1957. While the western community formed a common market that was managed ever more freely, Comecon took the path of restricting independence and increased planning. Economic stagnation followed which, in Czechoslovakia for example, was further

¹ Nálevka, V. (2003). *Studená válka*. Praha; Nálevka, V. (2000). *Světová politika ve 20. století (Vol. II.)*. Praha; Libionka, D. (2005). Poselství poštovních známek. *Dějiny a současnost*, No. 1, p. 21–24; Pandel, H. J., Scheiner, G. (eds.) (2007). *Handbuch Medien im Geschichtsunterricht*. Schwalbach; Stradling, R. (2003). *Multiperspektivita ve vyučování dějepisu: příručka pro učitele*. Praha; Labischová, D., Hudecová, D. (2009). *Nebojme se výuky moderních dějin: Nejnovější a soudobé dějiny v současném dějepisném vyučování*. Praha.

² Kovář, M. (2006). *Dějiny evropské integrace I*. Praha; Horčíčka, V., Kovář, M. (2006). *Dějiny evropské integrace II*. Praha; Hobsbawm, E. (2010). *Věk extrémů. Krátké dějiny 20. století 1914–1991*. Praha; Litera, B., Tejchman, M., Vykoukal, J. (2004). *Východ. Vznik, vývoj a rozpad sovětského bloku 1944–1989*. Praha.

intensified by an orientation towards heavy industry (amply reflected in the topics of national stamp issues) subordinated to the military. A further decline was ensured by the absence of new technology, obsolescence and loss of competitiveness in entire branches of production, and the lack of productivity of production centrally planned with no view to the market. As will be shown below, we can find implicit or even explicit criticism of social and economic conditions among the deluge of acclamatory motifs on the stamps of Comecon member states during the period of Soviet Perestroika.

There are many posters, postage stamps and other visual media from the Cold War period that promoted values and a way of life (either supported by the population of the individual blocs or forced onto them) by depicting model behaviour, the joy arising from it and attitudes worth copying. These images are addressed not merely at the domestic audience, but at the whole world. Just like Soviet stamps, American stamps also display a pronounced didactic accent. American stamps present young Americans in particular with working paragons of farmers, labourers and engineers as a means of promoting the work ethic that are surprisingly similar to their eastern counterparts. There are even stamps drawing attention to the low level of physical fitness or showing a woman as the mother of the family. Others promote peace, tolerance and freedom. Soviet posters and stamps from the Perestroika period are interesting for their open criticism of negative social phenomena that the Soviet leadership was attempting to combat, such as alcoholism (“Be Sober – A Normal Life, USSR Post Office 1985”).

The Soviet Communist programme of 1961 talked of the creation of the material and technical foundations of Communism on the basis of which the principles of a “classless” society were to be realised within Soviet society within twenty years³. Then First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev also gave assurances that the Soviet Union would catch up with and overtake the most developed economies in the world in short time. The visual media of the time, as reflected in the party congresses, sparkle with ideological self-confidence. The propagandist motifs employed are characterised by the use of the colour red, waving flags, hammers and sickles, and busts of the classics of Marxism-Leninism. They are full of five-pointed stars, frequently metamorphosing into the form of rockets rising steeply upwards into space with the initials KSSS (The Communist Party of the Soviet Union). Experiments of enormous dimensions focused above all on agriculture and, although obligingly reflected in and glorified

³ XXII. sjezd KSSS (1961). Praha: Rudé právo.

by contemporary visual media, proved entirely ineffective. The posters and stamps of the nineteen eighties are characterised by a rapid decline in the use of these unconvincing motifs in the face of the reality in the Soviet Union and its satellites.

The Soviet Union issued a considerable quantity of propagandist material (including a series of postage stamps) under the title *The True Peace Programme – The Peace-building Existence of the Socialist System* in the second half of the nineteen seventies (1979) in a spirit of strategies of persuasion and ideological engagement. Stamps were issued, for example, in connection with the missions undertaken by Leonid Brezhnev to selected countries and motifs taken from his speeches. At the same time, however, the Soviet Army went into Afghanistan.

The Communist Bloc established a centrally planned economy contrasting with the common market of the western community built on the principles of the free movement of people, labour, goods, services and finances. The competitive stimuli of a market economy were to be replaced by the initiative of party and youth organisations. Practically the entire post-war propagandist media, which understandably set the tone in this respect for “brother” nations, is therefore suffused with ideologised agitation associated with labour and patriotic enthusiasm.

The series of stamps issued in the USSR in 1983 under the motto “*Food Programme – A Universal Concern (Продовольственная программа – всенародное дело)*” gave an indication of which products were in short supply and why. In all probability, they had no influence on improving the situation with a view of long-term economic development.

Mikhail Gorbachev first used the word *Perestroika* in 1986. Attempts to correct “certain shortcomings” of the politico-economic system followed and led, in addition to administrative action, to media campaigns that also featured the use of posters and postage stamps. At the beginning of *Perestroika*, we find posters and stamps featuring topics promoting the rapid development of the national economy, the campaign against alcoholism and the fight against corruption. A weakening of censorship in civil life occurred – *Glasnost*. It was, however, clear that after the initial euphoria, the Communist camp would not stand the test without fundamental and deep reforms.

Partial private enterprise and the opportunity of creating companies with foreign participation were passed into law. The doctrine of a new thinking characterised by a retreat from the class principle in diplomacy and a striving for improved relations with the West gained ground in international politics. Nevertheless, it proved impossible to improve the

economic situation, and separatist tendencies were added to the growing dissatisfaction. The final stage of Perestroika (1989–1991) is judged to be economic and political destabilisation – the conflict between the Communists and the newly emerging democratic groupings. Empty shelves in the shops and disappointment and distrust among the population forced the decision to move towards democracy and a market economy⁴.

An examination of the iconographic material has confirmed a wealth of poster and stamp production in the given states that cannot be properly represented merely by a subjective selection conceived in this way. The topic of the Cold War, however, offers the frequent promotion of political, social and economic ideas, in addition to images of means of nuclear deterrent. In spite of the above-mentioned fragmentary nature of the examples gathered, let us hope that even such a concise annotated selection of pictorial material has, given an indication of its potential for testimony, motivation and education. It shows the contemporary reflection of one of the competing blocs defined by power and ideology on the visual media in the areas they demonstratively proclaimed as peaceful. The use of short texts in the main European languages, the deliberate communicativeness of the image, the chronology, the map evocations and the basic emblems create rewarding material from the subject matter of these media for simple analytic methods of a cross-disciplinary nature for the higher years of primary school.

Audio-visual media

Schoolchildren can also realise the character of politico-social conditions in the Soviet Bloc more easily by means of analytic work associated with didacticised examples of audio-visual media. Film and television production, controlled by the censors of the time and shaped by Communist ideology, represent suitable sources. The beginnings of television serials, and family serials in particular, can be dated back to 1959 in Communist Czechoslovakia. This kind of television programming soon became predominant, a position it has retained to this day. The first generation of television did not, as yet, fulfil consistently propagandist or ideological requirements, and was even uncensored for a short time. The largest number of television serials were, however, created in the nineteen eighties⁵. The television serial in the final twenty years of the

⁴ Gorbačov, M. (2014). *Vzpomínky a zamyšlení*. Praha.

⁵ Moc, J. (2009). *Seriály od A do Z*. Praha: Albatros.

Soviet Bloc can be characterised as a closed art form subordinate to ideological rules, while also serving a significant function in educating and socialising the population. The viewer could watch how a society run by Communists should function properly and how he or she should function within it. Serials of this kind also shaped the population's value system and served as a guide as to how to behave both at work and within the party, and in one's private and family life.

They emphasised the importance of labour professions, manual work, pay corresponding to this importance, and the solvency of the families of labourers in comparison to intellectual professions. In the nineteen seventies, in particular, there was an evident effort to reflect the policy of families with larger numbers of children, copying the demographic interests of the state, and support for housing construction, maternity grants and child benefits in serial storylines.

The focal point of these serials is usually an ideal happy family, though these serial families are nevertheless confronted with the hardships of life. The triggers of their family crises are usually forms of drug addiction, domestic violence, infertility and mental problems.

These serials also reflect efforts on the part of their characters to further their careers, while giving a critical mention to the prevailing nepotism (the acceptance of children for study, etc.). In the case of fathers trying to further their professional managerial careers, however, they state the necessity of membership of the Communist Party and checks on the political past of job applicants. Women trying to further their careers are seen as the cause of the disruption of family relationships.

The ever-present ideological framework of these serials serves to legitimise and support the regime and to justify the necessity and correctness of the social structure. Critical references are entirely absent in this regard. Other viewpoints regarding the world or the political structure are not shown. In serials depicting the more distant past, the accent is placed on the attitudes of the workers that were appropriated by the Communist regime as the roots of its own existence.

By means of analytical work connected with suitable clips from these television serials, schoolchildren can form a better understanding of the nature of television production controlled by censorship and shaped by Communist ideology. No matter whether these were strongly propagandist serials or entertaining ones, what the given serial was to depict was always determined in advance and strict checks were made to ensure that this was adhered to. By identifying the characteristic features of serial production, we lead the pupil to an awareness of who

and what they were about, the purpose for which they were made, and the environment in which they played out. Communist ideologists were well aware of the fact that the views of the public and television viewers are shaped in a decisive manner by the mass media. Watching television serials became something of an attraction, and this is what they remain to some extent to this day. Pupils should, under the guidance of the teacher, come to the conclusion that the Communist Party had a need to shape the attitudes of the citizen through the means of propaganda and to promote approval of the leading figure of the Communist Party and its policy within society. For example, society in Czechoslovakia occupied by the Soviet Army can be characterised for the purposes of history teaching as being resigned and as not rejecting television propaganda. The regime's media co-operated in the targeted manipulation and education of the citizen through the means of the family serial. Television production found support in the newspaper and magazine mass media presented as constructive criticism. The result was coordinated pressure on the citizen.

One goal of the educational activities with media products from the given period is to familiarise the pupil with the strategies of persuasion used by the ruling Communist Party to try to convince citizens of the correctness of the imposed value system and their subsequent voluntary sharing of it. Family serials, popular family comedies, television variety shows, etc. served as an effective tool. Some of the given serials can be called historical, in addition to being described as family serials, though not because they necessarily reflected historical reality. They can be labelled historical in view of the timeline on which their plot takes place, consisting of an interval of at least one generation in respect of the time at which they were made.

If we want to develop the pupil's ability to read and interpret correctly the stories conceived in this way in the next stage of the educational process, it is necessary to draw attention to the necessity of understanding timelines. When watching a film set in the past, viewers are generally exposed to the relatively specific (though typical for the given medium and genre) action of a number of overlapping temporal dimensions⁶. It is, for this reason, extremely important for the pupil to develop the skill of differentiating these levels. This problem can be demonstrated, in part,

⁶ Klimeš, I., Rak, J. (1988). Film a historie I. *Film a doba*, No. 3, pp. 140–145; Klimeš, I., Rak, J. (1988). Film a historie II. *Film a doba*, No. 6, pp. 333–337; Klimeš, I., Rak, J. (1988). Film a historie III. *Film a doba*, No. 9, pp. 516–521; Klimeš, I., Rak, J. (1988). Film a historie IV. *Film a doba*, No. 12, pp. 637–642.

with the example of the family chronicle *The Sons and Daughters of Jakub the Glassblower* (1985). The story describes the fortunes of the head of the family and his seven children. In addition to the timeline of the story itself, however, it also reflects the atmosphere of the inception of the film reconstruction, i.e. "normalisation", although it was not finished until the time of Gorbachev's Perestroika. The properties of reconstruction necessarily reflect the period in which the series was made. Another timeline can generally be clarified by the experience which tells us that the majority of feature films are based on a piece of literature. It is quite usual, however, for a considerable period of time to elapse between the writing of a piece of literature and its film adaptation. And the situation is complicated still further by a fourth characteristic consisting of the attitude and value models of the time in which we watch the film or in which it is used by the teacher for the purposes of an educational activity. Today's school pupils, like their predecessors, associate their own expectations, ideas and fashion influences and the acceptance of what they want to see with their reception of a film – aspects that may, and generally will, differ from the expectations of pupils living two or three generations ago in a different social, cultural and political climate.

Conclusion

The analysis and interpretation of visual media (postage stamps and posters) in Czech school history education remains something of an unknown quantity. Any form and level of practical application would, however, correspond more with the desired research trends of history education and media studies in line with the way in which they have long been developing to the west of our borders⁷.

Fragments of audio-visual media (film scenes) are, however, frequently used in teaching. Nevertheless, we are not promoting them here for the purpose of mere illustration of frontal education. Their being accompanied by other sources of information and teaching aids should go without saying for teachers. The serious question remains as to whether the teacher will prove capable of providing fitting interpretation of a fragment from a television serial and what other sources of information need to be provided for this media product to be understood by the pupil in the context of the age.

⁷ Pandel, H. J., Schneider, G. (eds.) (2007). *Handbuch Medien im Geschichtsunterricht*. Schwalbach.

It is, however, clear from the above that the socio-political images of the age in pop culture can be reconstructed in teaching in many ways, for example the analysis of many and various structure elements of a society run by Communists and the method of its depiction – the relationship to compulsory military service, labour versus intellectual occupations, the depiction of the ideal happy family, relationships between parents and children, models of behaviour, the economic position of individual professions, relationships to a consumer way of life, the ideological vocabulary, the demonstrated housing culture, gender aspects, moral values, fashion, humour, collective life, etc. An important part of the educational process is surely the given dimension of the current expectations of the pupil before the screening of a serial. After watching appropriate sequences, we recommend a reflective moderated discussion. The topic can then be enriched by the generation of parents sharing their memories of the “normalisation” period.

The pupil should, at the end of the educational process, be capable of understanding the period context of human action, handling this specific information in a critical and responsible manner, and formulating his or her own attitudes. On the basis of his or her prior knowledge, the pupil may consider the deeper causes or roots of the phenomena propagated in the analysed media. The result may be not merely the development of the ability of historical thinking, a deeper historical awareness and a perception of historical culture, but also heightened media literacy.