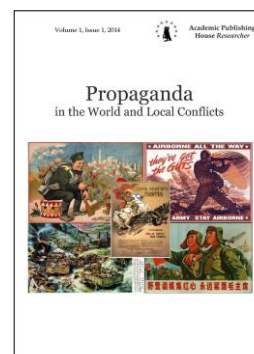


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## Soviet Anti-US Visual Propaganda during the Khrushchev Thaw (1953–1964) (Based on Materials from Krokodil Magazine)

Andrii E. Lebid <sup>a, b, \*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Sumy State University, Ukraine

<sup>b</sup> International Network Center for Fundamental and Applied Research, USA

### Abstract

This paper explores some of the key themes of Soviet anti-US visual propaganda in Krokodil, a satirical literary-artistic magazine. The author examines some of the key ways of disseminating this type of Soviet propaganda. The paper explores its manifestations across the physical, information, and virtual domains. The work reveals that Soviet propaganda used to be a tool for building the “right” model of the world by way of contrasting heroics with anti-heroics in Soviet-American relations. These relations were interpreted in Soviet visual propaganda both as an international conflict and as an antagonism between the socio-political conditions that the USSR and the US were in during the Cold War.

It is suggested that this visual propaganda, which concurrently influenced the cognitive, emotional-volitional, and communicative subsystems of the human mind, was aimed at building the picture of a world in which a happy citizen lives in a just state. An attempt is made to prove that at the time this type of propaganda performed an ideological function and was a key means of conducting ideological work in the USSR as part of its clash with world imperialism and capitalism.

**Keywords:** propaganda, visual propaganda, ideology, mass consciousness, political caricature.

### 1. Introduction

At different times, the USSR was home to a number of satirical magazines whose title included the term ‘krokodil’ [‘crocodile’] – over 10 different items. In addition to Krokodil proper, there were regional periodical publications such as Krokodil na Zapadnoi Ukraine [Crocodile in Western Ukraine], Bashkirskii Krokodil [Bashkir Crocodile], Rizhskii Krokodil [Riga Crocodile], Krokodil Luganskii [Lugansk Crocodile], as well as Bezbozhnyi Krokodil [Godless Crocodile], Krasnoarmeiskii Krokodil [Red Army Crocodile], Voennyi Krokodil [Military Crocodile], Gazeta Krokodila [Crocodile’s Gazette], Komsomol’skii Krokodil [Komsomol Crocodile], and a few others.

Krokodil magazine was founded in 1922. It was published three times a month. Over time, it became the USSR’s largest satirical periodical publication. During the period under review, the magazine had an impressive circulation. If in 1953 it was 350,000–400,000, in 1964 it was now 2,000,000. Consider here the fact that each year 36 issues of the magazine were published. By the end of the Khrushchev era, the magazine had a monthly circulation of 6,000,000 copies, and its yearly circulation was 72,000,000 copies. The magazine was to “be a weapon of satire, expose the flaws of the Soviet everyday, react to hot-button international issues, and criticize the

\* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: [schwarzschanenreich@gmail.com](mailto:schwarzschanenreich@gmail.com) (A. Lebid)

West's bourgeois culture, with a focus on deriding its ideological worthlessness and degeneracy" (Stykalin, Kremenskaya, 1963: 176-212).

Krokodil remained the Soviet Union's most long-lived and influential periodical publication used for state-sanctioned satire for over 70 years. It outlived the USSR. Due to financial difficulties, the magazine ceased publication in 2000. Between 2001 and 2004, thanks to the effort of a group of activists, Novyi Krokodil [New Crocodile] was published. However, unable to reach a mass readership, the magazine failed to cash in on its former fame and stopped its presses for good in 2008.

## 2. Materials and methods

In exploring the characteristics of Soviet visual propaganda, the author analyzed the content of 432 issues of Krokodil magazine, published from 1953 to 1964, a combined 6,912 pages, as well as a few hundred caricatures devoted to issues of international politics and the international status of the USSR during the Khrushchev Thaw.

The study was conducted based on principles of systemicity and historicism. The author employed the following methods: analysis of visual sources, interpretation, generalization, intent analysis, and content analysis. The use of these methods helped examine Soviet visual propaganda in its dynamic development and analyze the picture of a world for Soviet citizens that it was building.

## 3. Discussion

The study of propaganda is essential in understanding history and mentality. This research seems increasingly relevant today amid changes in the forms and mechanisms of propaganda due to the development of the Internet, social networks, and new types of media. Yet, many of the visual forms and ways of manipulating mass consciousness that used to be employed in the past appear to be no less efficient today.

Issues of propaganda have found reflection in the pages of numerous scholarly works focused on the study of general principles and mechanisms of propaganda (Bernays, 2004; Pochepczov, 2018; Pochepczov, 2019; White, 1980 i dr.) and its particular applied aspects alike (Podmariczy`n, 2013; Luchshev, 2016; Mamedova, 2013; Klinova, Trofimov, 2017; Soldak, 2017 i dr.). Worthy of separate mention is the pool of research devoted to Soviet visual propaganda specifically (Fedosov, 2018) – particularly, the use of political caricatures (Chervyakov, 2019; Ety, 2016; Ety, 2019).

It is worth noting that Soviet anti-US visual propaganda and political caricatures in Soviet satirical magazines, namely Krokodil, remains a little-researched subject. For the most part, you will come across several isolated works that are devoted to visual propaganda. There remains a paucity of research devoted to the analysis of propaganda materials in Krokodil magazine.

E. Bernays was one of the first to propound a method for shaping and manipulating public opinion and mass consciousness – the so-called “engineering of consent”. The scholar defines propaganda as multidirectional management of collective consciousness and organized manipulation of public opinion (Bernays, 2004).

According to S. White, the history of the USSR cannot be explored without conceptualizing ideology and propaganda as two of the key pillars of the Soviet political regime. The scholar notes the determining role of propaganda in shaping the political mass consciousness of the Soviet people, which acquired particular new characteristics at different stages in the development of the Soviet state (White, 1980).

A broad spectrum of issues on the history and theory of propaganda have been reflected in *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion: A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present*. The authors suggest that propaganda is characterized by a continually expanding nature – as the product of an agitator whose target audience is a certain mass of people, as manipulative actions by a shadow government, as a means of influencing people's consciousness, etc. (Cull et al., 2003).

A joint work under the editorship of G. Rawnsley, *Cold-War Propaganda in the 1950s*, examines issues of the origins, organization, and methods of British, American, and Soviet propaganda in the 1950s. The book analyzes some of the major international and domestic aspects of propaganda that determined the general contours of the development of the Cold War and some of the key propaganda practices employed in that period (Rawnsley, 1999).

Worthy of separate mention is the pool of research that reflects some of the key applied aspects of propaganda. To be specific, the mechanisms underpinning the special way the October Revolution was presented in the pages of *Krokodil* magazine during the period 1920–1930s have been explored by scholars M. Klinova and A. Trofimov. The authors have analyzed the event in the following three conceptual planes: solemn, comparative, and pragmatic. The event appears to have been exploited to construct a set of new symbols and to build into mass consciousness the “right” interpretations of what happened during that period (Klinova, Trofimov, 2017).

Scholar E. Luchshev has explored the emergence and development of the system of atheist education, analyzed some of the key forms, methods, and characteristics of the ideological struggle against religion in the period 1917–1941, and investigated the ideology of mass atheism in the USSR (Luchshev, 2016).

The development of new forms of Soviet scientific-atheist propaganda using administrative-forcible methods has been explored by scholar A. Podmaritsyn (Podmaritsyn, 2013).

The characteristics of Soviet propaganda in relation to children, including the issue of cultivating in them a relevant attitude toward Soviet power, have been examined by K. Soldak (Soldak, 2017).

J. Etty, who has investigated Soviet political satire in *Krokodil* in the period 1954–1964, notes that subsequent to Joseph Stalin’s death the magazine received a new lease of life thanks to reduced censorship and improved economic well-being in the USSR (Etty, 2019). The scholar has also attempted to gain an insight into the nature of political satire in the magazine. He has investigated processes related to the production and consumption of the magazine’s content. By way of transmedia theory, the scholar has discussed the influence of the reader on the development of the magazine’s topics. He has also investigated the performative power of political satire in the magazine’s pages (Etty, 2016).

A. Mamedova has explored the language of Soviet visual propaganda, particularly the use of various signs and symbols in covering hot-button international and domestic topics (Mamedova, 2013).

E. Fedosov suggests that “with the commencement of the Cold War Soviet propaganda had a continual orientation toward the foreign world”, and by the end of the 1950s it reached a global scale, when international events came to be viewed through the prism of propaganda activity, with a focus on the creation of caricature images of the USSR’s ideological allies and opponents (Fedosov, 2013). The scholar views Soviet propaganda as a sociocultural phenomenon that served as one of the ways to shape Soviet identity (Fedosov, 2018).

#### 4. Results

Before moving on to examine the actual object of this study, it will be worth analyzing the characteristics of Soviet propaganda proper, which could well be viewed as a “weapon of mass destruction” open to a diversity of uses. A medium with a long history, Soviet propaganda was designed to shape the state’s past, present, and future across the physical, information, and virtual domains. It was capable of bringing some individuals to the level of sacred figures – whilst, at the same time, it could altogether erase others from historical memory or easily ascribe to them the qualities of an enemy, or “them”.

Soviet propaganda manipulated concepts and images in the virtual domain to create a more “correct” and “just” model of “our” world. Furthermore, it extended its reach and influence into the physical and information domains, with a focus on thwarting the spread of narratives with a different interpretation of Soviet reality.

The determining role of propaganda within the physical domain was manifested in the renaming of streets and setting up of monuments that carried certain symbolic significations. This is known as static symbolization. Parades, demonstrations, flower-laying ceremonies, and other rituals were employed as dynamic symbolization.

The information domain was controlled via the institution of censorship, and the actual system of propaganda was implemented through print publications with multi-million circulations.

In organizing the virtual domain, there was a focus on building a system of knowledge with the “right” interpretation of Soviet reality – creating a virtual product based on what the state’s ideological system required.

This way to control propaganda, which held for all the three domains, characterized it as total and indispensable to the existence of the Soviet state. Soviet propaganda permeated all spheres of life in Soviet society, with a focus on creating a universal narrative and discourses clearly defined by the state. The key forms and ways of spreading Soviet propaganda included the following:

1) Schools and youth organizations, which were to construct a relevant picture of the world and shape behavioral patterns for the nation's future generations (e.g., Yunye Oktyabryata (Little Octobrists), Yunye Pionery (Young Pioneers), and Komsomol).

2) Radio, with a focus on reaching the illiterate portion of the population.

3) Posters, with a focus on the use of simple drawings designed to trigger relevant emotional reactions.

4) Cinema. The Soviet government employed propaganda films to influence and inspire the population. For citizens who for some reason were unable to enjoy the opportunity to watch films at a movie theater, news-films were shown on the walls of subway stations, agit-trains, etc. Propaganda trains were outfitted with a printing press, a mobile movie theater, and a radio receiving set and had an agitational speaker onboard employed to inform, entertain, and influence the masses.

5) Public lectures, as a way to inform Soviet citizens on major news, talk to them about the importance of the right habits of living, etc.

6) Art. During the Soviet period, popular propaganda images relied upon heroic socialist realism and were focused on the Soviet ideals of vitality, health, happiness, industrialization, work success, etc.

7) Print publications, like newspapers, magazines, and books. Subsequent to the Revolution of 1917, all libraries in the country were "cleaned up", all deviant writers and scholars were deported, and all nationalized printeries and publishing houses were placed under censorship. Censorship of books was not as strict as that of newspapers or magazines, which did not, however, prevent a significant portion of the material from being either edited or destroyed altogether.

8) Agitprop theatre, which involved the use of simple onstage plays with characters who personified good and evil, designed to awaken in one emotions and feelings of support for the Soviet government or/and those of animosity toward the enemy.

9) Mass demonstrations, designed to reinforce, directly or indirectly, popular support for the government.

Thus, Soviet propaganda was quite a powerful tool for constructing the "right" model of the world that relied upon tried-and-true mechanisms for the control of mass consciousness. It was characterized by the same narratives being repeated as often as possible and circulated as wide as possible, with a focus on translating them into a soft form, like art, literature, movies, and leisure, with a view to evoking in one the right emotions.

Soviet propaganda was monological and did not tolerate dissent. Of no less importance in this context was the role of censorship and security agencies, which sought to combat discourses that were alternative to the official one and clamp down on carriers thereof, believed to produce "wrong" information flows. It follows from the above that Soviet propaganda, just like propaganda in any other country, was creating a sort of memes and information viruses of its own that were to be spread by their carriers as fast as possible across the information and virtual domains, shaping, thereby, the structure of the physical domain.

In the context of Soviet propaganda, worthy of special mention is the fact that the victory of the visual over the verbal occurred long before the advent of the Internet, social networks, and new media. Back in the Middle Ages, use was made of the idea of *Pictura Quasi Scriptura*, which suggested that images can be read as text and the actual perception of images was often determined by the verb 'read'. The visual is more ancient than the verbal. It is graphic and does not require expression through words. The visual is positioned with the recipient of information, and the dialogical verbal – with its source. Soviet propaganda made effective use of both visual and verbal communication.

An analysis of materials from *Krokodil* magazine indicates quite a simple logic behind the construction of its narratives. Indeed, the more mass a product, the simpler it must be. One of the most powerful means of influence at the time was satire, specifically the genre of caricatures. Without question, *Krokodil* magazine, which simultaneously was a satirical and ideological

periodical publication, sought to reflect the general line of policy pursued by the Soviet government. It served as a propaganda mouthpiece for the entire Union.

As a means of visual propaganda, caricatures were employed to simultaneously influence the cognitive (perception, thinking, and memory), emotional-volitional, and communicative subsystems of the human mind. For their influence to be effective, caricatures were to be in line with the following standards on delivery and evoking:

- 1) being a mass form of visual art intended to perform a set of clearly predefined utilitarian social functions;
- 2) being a carrier of fast-track information, with a focus on having the main idea expressed in a simple, clear, and unequivocal manner to avoid a plurality of interpretations;



**Fig. 1.** Seeing eye-to-eye. The heyday of McCarthyism

- 3) the effect on the recipient lasting for a limited amount of time, which implies limits on imagery, style of execution, and emotionality;



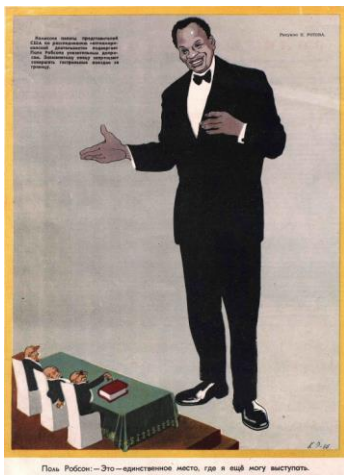
**Fig. 2.** This caricature depicts the realities of American-Korean relations in the 1950–60s, when subsequent to the Korean War the US focused on containing the “Chinese threat”, which involved creating in the region joint security systems with Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. The Taiwan issue was a particular bugbear in American-Taiwanese relations and was a factor in them worsening

- 4) facilitating a more efficient perception of the gist of a caricature through reducing the depth of space, minimizing the number of planes (limiting it to no more than two), using local colors, keeping the contours plain and sharp, and employing color contrast with a sharp transition boundary;



**Fig. 3.** The American plan for unifying Germany... It is sewn with white threads

5) employing conceptual contrast through the use of opposites (e.g., giants versus dwarfs, grotesque, and allegories).



**Fig. 4.** “This is the only place where I can still appear”. The members of the U.S. HUAC have subjected Paul Robeson to a humiliating interrogation. They have forbidden the famous singer to make appearances outside U.S. borders

Caricatures in Soviet visual propaganda were, thus, performing the following two key functions: (1) communicating something to the audience and (2) influencing it through mechanisms of clarity and expressiveness. A characteristic of Soviet anti-US visual propaganda was the use of the “us”, “others” (the USSR’s allies and confederates), and “them” (in the more complex cultural-semiotic domain) narrative. It is the image of the opposing “them” that was most effective in uniting the people in their sacred opposition to Evil.

Of interest is the fact that, while the USSR’s confrontation with the West, represented by the US, was covered by Soviet propaganda within the framework of the military-political rivalry between the two countries, in the broader context it was interpreted as a rivalry between socialism and capitalism. To this end, the following two methods were employed: (1) the use of symbolically generalized caricatures to portray the US stereotypically (e.g., Uncle Sam, the dollar, the Congress, etc.); (2) a focus on differences in social class relations (e.g., depicting the enemy (“them”) as a bourgeois wearing a top hat and a tuxedo or a cocky heavily armed military person).

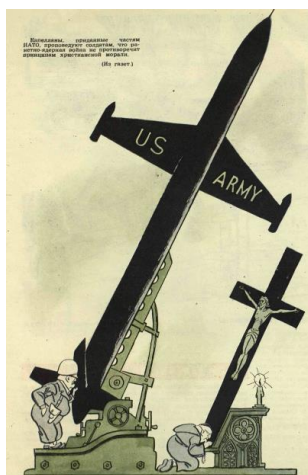
In this context, the following models of the enemy (“them”) and formats of their perception in mass consciousness were employed:

1) the mythological model: in terms of the “us” and “them” narrative, there is the Hero and there is the Anti-Hero; anything that is characteristic of “us” is not characteristic of “them” and vice versa;

2) the totalitarian-religious model: in terms of the “us” and “them” narrative, “them” must strictly be regarded as the enemy and will always possess the qualities of an enemy;

3) the philosophical model: in terms of the “us” and “them” narrative, there is “me” and there is “others”.

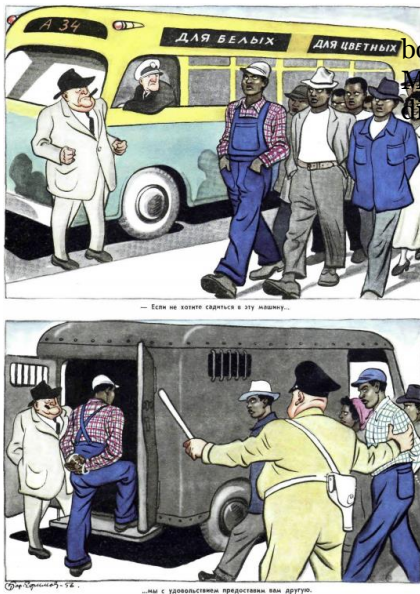
It follows from the above that in the period under review Soviet visual propaganda in Krokodil magazine portrayed the US and its allies as the enemy mainly using the terms and images of the totalitarian-religious model. In doing so, it demonstrably demonized them, imputing to them, and absolutizing, qualities such as aggression, anti-humanism, greed, money-grubbing, manipulation, etc., i.e. the qualities that were not typical of “us”. There was the Hero (the USSR) and the Anti-Hero (the US), i.e. the ontological nature of good was contrasted with that of evil (global imperialism, capitalism, chauvinism, and bourgeois dictatorship).



**Fig. 5-8.** Soviet propaganda portrayed the US and its allies as an aggressive adverse bloc. Moreover, the latter were portrayed as an incarnation of metaphysical evil, whilst the USSR was depicted as an incarnation of metaphysical good. Evil, naturally, must be punished and destroyed, so that was the message communicated to the regular Soviet citizen through propaganda. Despite the détente in foreign relations, messages of this kind continued to be disseminated (even though their volume decreased and they were a lot less radical in conception), with the US remaining to be the USSR’s enemy number one



Legal proceedings in the US:  
 - Are all these guys witnesses? Which case is it?  
 - It's up to you, sir.



The police are cracking down on African Americans who boycott the public transportation system of the city of Montgomery (Alabama, USA) as a token of protest against racial discrimination.



Forbid it? Are you a Communist?  
 Don't you know that America is a country of freedom?

**Fig. 9-12.** Generally, Soviet propaganda in the pages of Krokodil magazine reacted with political satire to any major international event. It sought to vilify the realities of American society, often focusing on specific aspects thereof, like increased red tape, the social status of workers, racism and racial segregation, the civil rights movement, McCarthyism, colonialism, etc.

Another important aspect of the activity of Krokodil magazine was to provide ideological satirical interpretations of the international political situation, with a focus on denouncing the “predatory plans” of the US and its allies. Of particular interest is the fact that Soviet propaganda tended to portray the US’s allies as mere puppets subordinate to the will of the US, with which they were bound by onerous agreements and contracts. Krokodil characterized this policy as “predatory” in relation to both America’s allies and other nations potentially within its ambit of influence (e.g., the member states of NATO, those of SEATO, etc.).



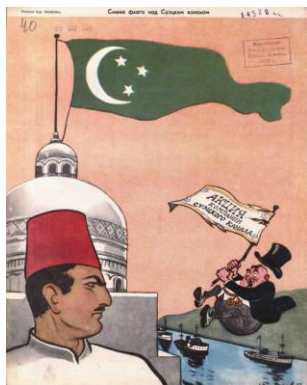
**Fig. 13.** The true face of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization



**Fig. 14.** Under pressure from the US, NATO countries are upping their military spending by \$1.5 billion. These funds will be used to purchase weapons from the US



No less trenchant was the way Soviet propaganda reacted to a series of headline-making international events in the Khrushchev Thaw period. Specifically, the magazine shared a vision of the causes behind the Suez crisis and the participation in it of the “imperialist war dogs”. Krokodil’s reaction to this conflict was quite trenchant, with the magazine obviously siding with Egypt and directing satire at the plans of France and Great Britain, the US’s allies, to “tame” Egypt.



**Fig. 15.** A change of flag over the Suez Canal

**Fig. 16.** Egypt's sovereignty. Can't contain it

Built in 1869, the Suez Canal provides a crucial shortcut from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean. Its construction was funded by the governments of France and Egypt. As early as 1875, a financial crisis forced the Egyptians sell a large portion of their share in the canal. Consequently, the Suez Canal was controlled by France and Great Britain over the following 87 years. In 1956, Egyptian President G. Nasser initiated the collection of funds for constructing the Aswan Dam. He resolved to nationalize the canal, which would lead to an armed conflict.

The British and French governments were bound by appropriate agreements with Egypt. A key aspect of the reform agenda was modernizing and rearming the Egyptian army. The Egyptian president requested that Great Britain and the US sell Egypt some weapons. However, back in 1950, the US, Great Britain, and France had signed a tripartite agreement (the Tripartite Declaration of 1950) that restricted the sale of weapons to the countries of the Middle East. Egypt was allowed to purchase weapons only if it joined the Baghdad Pact, designed to create a strategic security belt along the USSR's borders to contain its expansion to the Middle East. These conditions did not suit G. Nasser, so all his attempts to acquire weapons from the US or Great Britain failed. Then, the Egyptian president turned to the USSR for weapons.

No less categorical was Krokodil’s treatment of the events related to the West Berlin issue (the Berlin Crisis of 1961).



**Fig. 17.** The caricature

Subsequent to the end of World War II, Germany was split by the allies into two states – the Federal Republic of Germany, which was to be controlled by the USSR’s anti-Hitler coalition allies, and the German Democratic Republic, which was to be run by the USSR. The same was done to the city of Berlin – West Berlin came under the jurisdiction of the US, Great Britain, and France

(the Trizone), and East Berlin was placed under the jurisdiction of the Soviet Union. Despite withdrawing its troops from the city in 1958, the USSR de facto continued to control the area. The USSR demanded that the allies do the same. The two camps never reached an agreement on this, with West Berlin remaining occupied by US, British, and French troops.

In response to that, the USSR intended to provide the East German government with control over access to the city and enter with it into a separate peace treaty. The US and France were against this. The USSR urged the East German government to boost control over the border between East Berlin and West Berlin, which eventually led to the building of the Berlin Wall. The US government responded by deploying troops along the wall, and the USSR suspended the demobilization of its troops in the region. The status of West Berlin continued to be a stumbling block in relations between the USSR and the countries of the West. Eventually, N. Khrushchev suggested calling a conference of the Four Great Powers with a view to reconsidering the status of West Berlin and turning it into a demilitarized free city.

The failed US-directed Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis, which followed it, were covered in the magazine's pages as well.



**Fig. 18.** In the fashionable resort city of Miami, 80,000 US-backed Cuban counterrevolutionaries and professional thugs are getting ready to invade Cuba



**Fig. 19.** Fidel Castro's visit to Moscow (1963)

The continual expansion of NATO and the US's deployment in Turkey in 1961 of medium range missiles, a direct threat to the military-industrial hubs of the USSR, which at the time did not have the technical capability to defend itself against this type of weapons, led the Soviet government to undertake the deployment of ground-launched ballistic and tactical missiles in Cuba, where there had just failed a US-initiated military operation against Fidel Castro's government. This would lead to a major crisis in US-USSR relations, with the world finding itself on the brink of World War III. The two powerhouses would eventually manage to avoid war thanks to the prudence and the political will and resolve of their leaders.

That is just a portion of the huge pool of anti-US propaganda in the USSR. Obviously, the spectrum of events in the US and across the West was quite broad, with most of those drawing a trenchant satirical reaction in the pages of Krokodil magazine.

It is worth noting that the US was not the only object of derision in the magazine's pages – propaganda was aimed at its allies, a second-order enemy, too. Labels with negative connotations were put on capitalists, colonialists, reactionaries, members of the church, etc. Now and then, Soviet propaganda resorted to the images of fascization – mainly, in relation to the powers-that-be in West Germany. The use of fascist symbols in Soviet visual propaganda served to amplify the negative characteristics of the West German political elite.



**Fig. 20.** Under the pretext of aid, American monopolists are foisting weapons on Western European nations on onerous terms

## 5. Conclusion

Propaganda was an indispensable part of the Soviet agenda – it helped respond to any hot-button issues, providing simple, easy-to-perceive, and easy-to-digest answers. Propaganda was a mandatory part of the life of a Soviet citizen but by no means complemented it. It built the picture of a world in which a happy citizen lived in a just state, contrasting it with the decaying West, with all its both real and made-up flaws. Propaganda was used to build a universal truth and adopt it in lieu of a pluralism of truths. In this role, propaganda performed an ideological function, serving as a key means of conducting ideological work in the USSR. Ideology and propaganda, as a practical form of spreading ideology, found specific expression in the worldviews, ideals, public images, stereotypes, and identity of Soviet people.

What is undoubted is the fact that Soviet propaganda was powerful, which is attested by the various propaganda mechanisms, methods, and narratives employed at the time. In essence, Soviet propaganda was monological and did not tolerate dissent. It was backed by all social and government institutions, including in the areas of literature, education, the arts, etc. Key characteristics of propaganda at the time were frequent repetition and increased replicability.

In large part, Soviet propaganda was based on the hero-antihero model. This model was employed in both peace and war contexts and was used to heroize workers and soldiers alike. According to Krokodil, man's core values were peace, work, and internationalism, which it contrasted with guile, greed, hypocrisy, etc. – that is, the qualities typical of the capitalist, colonialist, and reactionary.

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