

Drawing the Curtain



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The Cold War in Cartoons



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Soviet cartoons courtesy of Ne Boltail Collection
www.neboltai.org



Western cartoons researched and compiled
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www.politicalcartoon.co.uk



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Cover image
Boris Efimov (see p. 80)

Fig. 1 (pp. 2–3)
Boris Efimov
1959

Caption: *Drawing linked to the slight warming
in Soviet-American relations and the visit of Nikita
Khrushchev to the USA*

Fig. 2 (pp. 4–5)
Kukryniksy
1968
Title: *In the Bog of a Dirty War*

Endpaper
David Low
24 May 1952
Picture Post

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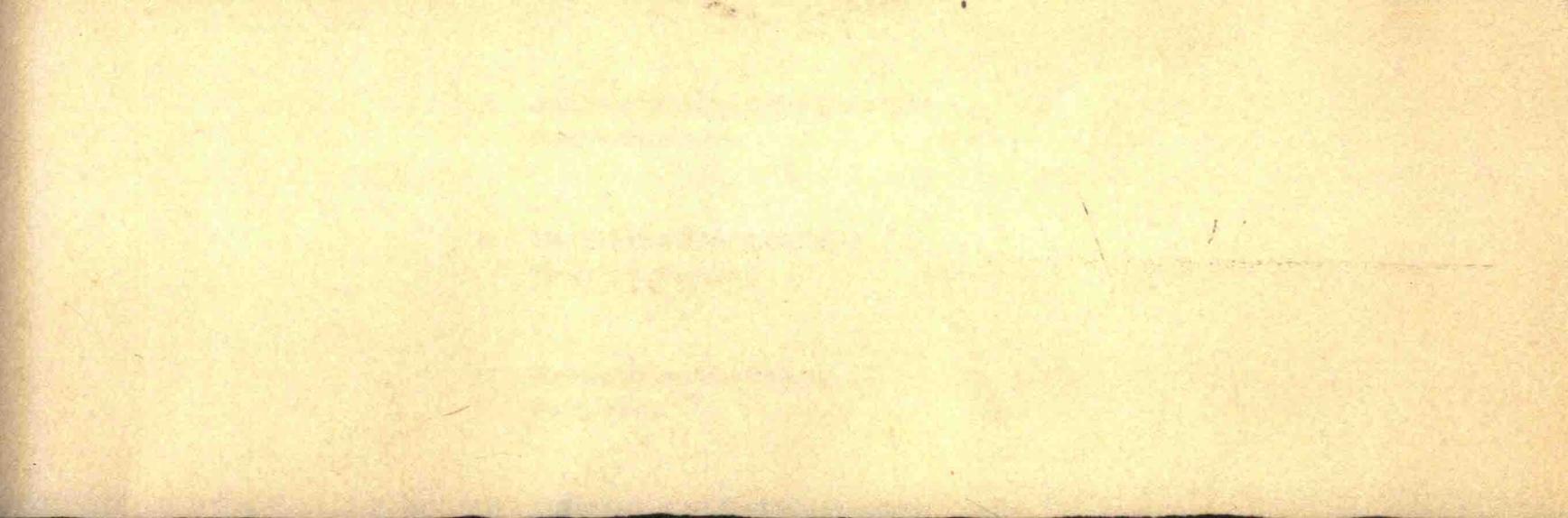
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The drawings of the most talented cartoonists live long in the memory. I was six when the Second World War started; the newspapers, of course, were beyond me, but I used to look closely at the cartoons in the satirical magazine *Krokodil* – so closely that I remember many of them to this day. For example, I recall a cartoon illustrating the signs that the Nazis said proved Arian descent: tall, slim and fair-haired. And above each word was a caricature of the bandy-legged runt Goebbels, the pot-bellied Goering and the Führer himself with his quiff of black hair smeared across his forehead. And that was it: no further proof of the mendacity of theories of racial superiority was needed.

The caricature is a crooked mirror, at once reflecting and distorting the world around us; and just like the fairground hall of mirrors, it is enormously popular. The particular skill of the cartoonist is this: on the one hand he must illustrate up-to-the-minute events in the most lucid way, often through sarcasm and irony; but on the other he must not overstep the line that distinguishes art from kitsch.

This book gathers the most striking examples of the cartoonist's art during the Cold War, from both sides of the Iron Curtain. The result is essentially a history of the second half of the twentieth century: from the gentle humour of the mid-1940s, when the world lived in a state of euphoric anticipation of peace and prosperity to come; through the mutual mistrust – not to say hatred – of the 1950s to 1970s; right up to the hopes of perestroika, and even the diplomatic 'reboots' of recent times. Although where it all ends, of course, is decided not by cartoonists, but by the sanity of our political leaders.

Historians differ over the date of the onset of the Cold War: some point to Churchill's speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, with its use of the phrase 'the Iron Curtain' (see p. 42); others to the 'long telegram' sent by Ambassador George Kennan from Moscow to Washington in 1946, which first advocated a policy of containment towards the Soviet Union. In the West this telegram is remembered as a model of political wisdom and foresight, but all I can remember of it as a twelve-year-old is a caricature of Ambassador Kennan as a cannibal with a bone between his teeth. Years later I met George Kennan, and he was a fine, good-looking man; but the image of him as cannibal is what remains with me.

When you look at the cartoons in this book, you may be struck by how similar they are, not just in subject matter – after all, they have been chosen to reflect the same events – but in the way in which they are drawn. The suspicion may even arise that perhaps the artists on either side of the Iron Curtain copied from each other. Certainly it is not impossible that they were familiar with images from the other side; and as professionals they could not simply ignore the work of a rival. Perhaps, though, we should not be so surprised, for each side of the Iron Curtain was in a way a mirror image of the other. For Americans the Soviet Union was the 'evil empire', while from the other side of the curtain the evil empire was the United States itself. The Americans suspected the Soviets of preparing for nuclear and conventional war, anticipating a missile attack at any moment. In Moscow, meanwhile, there was little doubt that politicians in Washington would strike at the first opportunity, and in order to protect themselves, the Russians did all they could to frighten their opponents: through parades of military power, and even with blow-up rubber tanks and missiles to supplement real ones.

These similarities were something of which my father had personal experience. In the 1950s he was on friendly terms with the Yugoslav ambassador to the USSR, Veljko Mićunović. They discussed international problems as openly as the leader of one state can with the ambassador of another. After the diplomatic receptions that were so frequent at the time, my father would sometimes drive the ambassador back to his residence. It was a short distance, and often the premier and ambassador would continue their conversation in the limousine once it had drawn up – on one occasion talking for so long that the ambassador's wife came out in the snow to enquire whether it wouldn't be better for the men to come inside, where she could make them a nice cup of tea.

At one meeting with Mićunović, Khrushchev expressed his displeasure at an unflattering cartoon which had recently appeared in a Yugoslav magazine (one of the duties of Soviet diplomats was to keep a close eye on the image of the leader in the foreign press). The ambassador was amazed at this hiccup in relations between the two countries, and decided to get to the bottom of it. On the next occasion he armed himself with a copy of the offending magazine with its not altogether complimentary portrait. He showed it my father, who frowned. Then, after a suitable pause, the ambassador translated the caption, which the Soviet embassy in Belgrade had not taken the trouble to read. It revealed that the cartoon was not of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, but of US President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Both bald, round-headed and with a smile on their faces – how could they not be confused? My father grinned, and the incident was forgotten.

All cartoons, political and otherwise, are imprints from our lives, as they turn with the passage of time into history. This is the subject of this book, always interesting and always instructive; but as you read it, do not mourn the past.

The ideological battle-lines of the Cold War were quickly drawn. Signs of a growing rift between Hitler's former adversaries had become clear within months of their defeat of Germany in May 1945. This was reflected in the work of leading political cartoonists on both sides. Wartime images of comradely alliance between East and West gave way to a new reality of suspicion and mistrust. 'When our allies stopped being our allies we started to depict them as a kind of enemy, as aggressors', commented Boris Efimov, the Soviet Union's most famous cold-war cartoonist.¹

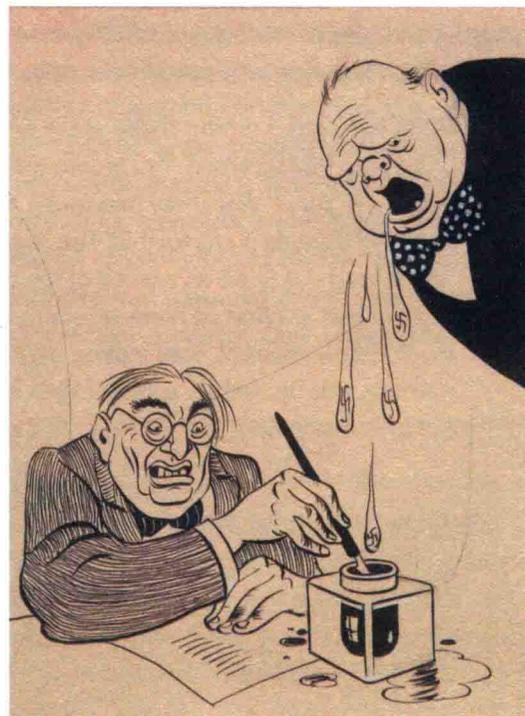


Fig. 3
Boris Efimov
1949

The cartoon shows a member of the bourgeois press dipping his pen in the vitriol pouring from Churchill's mouth. As was often the case with Efimov's cartoons, the villain bears a close resemblance to the artist himself.

Efimov's career spanned the entire period, his life the entire twentieth century: he died in 2008 at the age of 108. In an interview in 1999 he described what it was like working as a cartoonist at the height of the Cold War:

We were simple people; we didn't do politics. Those who sat at the very top did the politics. We were the executives and ... sometimes I had to do something that went against my convictions, but I thought first of all that those at the top knew better about politics. Later I knew that whatever my objections might have been, they would have brushed me away like some kind of pawn.

From the outset political cartooning in the Soviet Union was markedly different in style and content from that of the West. The cartoons that appeared in newspapers and satirical magazines such as *Pravda*, *Izvestia* and *Krokodil* were blatant propaganda tools of the regime. Both Stalin and his successor Khrushchev adamantly believed that

the press was the communist elite's most potent ideological weapon, and that it was therefore crucial to control every element, as Efimov describes:

Propaganda used music and poetry and songs and paintings and cartoons. All this was managed by a system which went from the top down to the bottom ... And they told us about the wisdom of Stalin, his kindness and that we shouldn't despair. And people had no way out but to believe. What alternative did they have? Not believing? That would lead to certain death.

The main task of the political cartoonist was 'to expose and make fun of, or brand a disgrace, whichever of our enemies the given occasion demanded'. Pavel Satiukov, editor of *Pravda* under Khrushchev, believed that the most important responsibility of a Soviet cartoonist was 'great sensitivity to the Party's needs'.² According to Efimov, that meant that 'you did what you were told if you wanted to save your neck. So if they said the Americans were our enemies, imperialists who wanted to start a new war and smash the Soviet Union, that's what they were.'

Refusal to follow the party line would have meant not only instant dismissal for a cartoonist, but the likelihood that he and his family would be labelled as 'enemies of the people' and sent to the Siberian Gulag, or worse. Efimov described the psychological effect of not knowing why people disappeared, or who would be next:

What happened during those years on any newspaper, any magazine ... people disappeared. You would arrive in the morning and ask, 'Where is Yury?' Well, they had taken him away in the night. You couldn't discuss it any further. The maximum you could say was, 'He turned out to be an enemy of the people' ... I couldn't really believe that we had so many enemies of the people ... And then you involuntarily thought, well maybe they're not arresting people for nothing, maybe there's something in it, maybe it turned out he was guilty of something.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Soviet cartoonists preferred to play it safe, by grotesquely vilifying the West on the one hand, and depicting a Soviet paradise of wide-eyed, smiling, ethnically diverse youth (the old are mostly absent), on the other. For this hard-working, peace-loving, well-fed and blissfully happy nation, unlike the West, economic difficulties, military setbacks, discontent and dissent did not exist. Any failings within the Soviet system, if admitted at all, were portrayed in cartoons – as they were in newspaper denunciations – as the fault of incompetent or dishonest lowly bureaucrats, rather than the responsibility of those further up the party ladder.

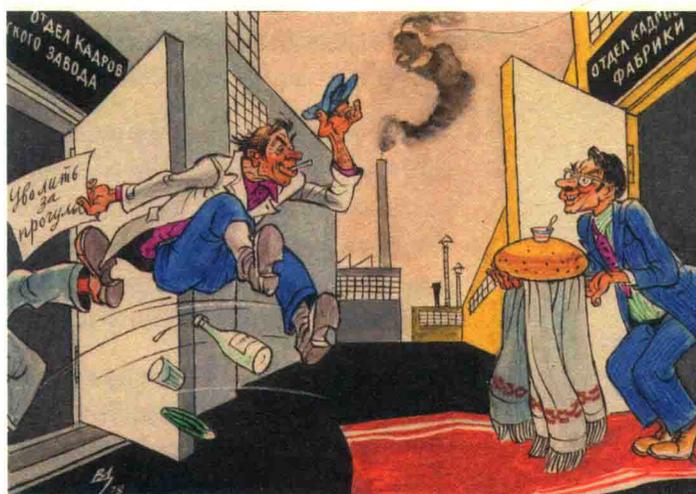


Fig. 4
Vladimir Dobrovolsky
1978
Text: (above doors) *Factory personnel department; (on paper) Fired for absenteeism*

The cartoon shows a factory manager greeting his rival's recently fired employee with a red carpet and the traditional Russian welcome of bread and salt.

For the entire duration of the Cold War, of course, it was the United States that was regarded as the main threat to the Soviet Union. Soviet cartoonists quickly developed a recognisable array of quasi-formulaic images and characters to convey the nature of this threat to the Soviet reader. Dominating its European allies, the United States is portrayed as the centre of all that is regressive and reactionary in the world. Its political and military leaders are shown as capitalistic, neo-Fascist imperialists determined to wage war against the peace-loving Soviets at the expense of their own downtrodden poverty-stricken masses. This characterisation of the West, which had its roots in pre-war communist propaganda, was quickly reinforced as the wartime alliance broke down. Recalling his friendship with the British cartoonist David Low, whom he had first met in Moscow in 1932, Efimov described how a mutual 'hatred of fascism' was expressed in their wartime caricatures of Hitler and Mussolini, but how later their targets inevitably diverged:

Now my satirical arrows were directed at the 'warmongers' Churchill, Bevin, Acheson and other English and American politicians. While in Low's caricatures of the same period the 'warmongers' and those responsible for inflaming international tensions ... were Stalin and Molotov.³

In the work of Efimov and other Soviet cartoonists such as Yuly Ganf and the Kukryniksy, America is consistently depicted as a corrupt and racist police state where democracy and freedom of speech are little more than an illusion. The racist card in particular, often symbolised by the hooded garb of the Ku Klux Klan, is seen as an effective tool of condemnation against a divided country in the throes of the civil rights movement. America's allies, meanwhile, are shown as either duplicitous or pathetically in thrall to their transatlantic cousins. Britain, generally a sullen-faced John Bull in threadbare clothes, or a degraded and devalued pound sign, or perhaps an emaciated, flea-bitten lion, is America's lackey: a broken, post-imperialist, bankrupt shadow of its former self (p. 94).

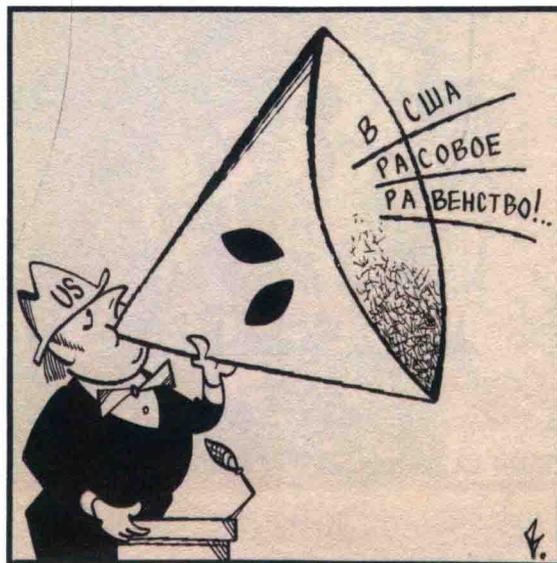


Fig. 5
Mark Vaisbord
1960s
Title: *Racists' Megaphone*
Text: *There is racial equality in the USA!*

But just as the regime's anti-West rhetoric was reflected in cartoons, so too were the periodic changes of tone, when a cultural initiative or arms-reduction talk might lead to a (generally short-lived) thawing of the political frost. Khrushchev's emergence as Soviet leader was seen by both sides as a chance to improve relations, and over the next few years, particularly with Khrushchev's visit to the United States in 1959, Soviet cartoons would occasionally show the USSR extending the hand of friendship to its great rival (pp. 2-3). With the Cuban crisis in 1961 the hand was very decisively withdrawn.