

On the Topic of Role Models for Young People in Visual Media and History Education: Czechoslovakia 1948–1989

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The text of the paper aims to analyse selected educational patterns from contemporary visual media (Czechoslovakia 1948–89) – postage stamps, posters, comics or caricatures aimed at the target group of young people. For the totalitarian communist regime, the youth represented an easily educated bearer of ideas and the prospects of maintaining the regime in the generations to come. The didactic application of these patterns in history education represents a suitable alternative to media education.

Key words: *communist regime; propaganda; youth; educational patterns; visual media; ideological indoctrination; Czechoslovakia 1948–1989*

Introduction

The communist regime showed extreme interest in youth, as it represented an easily educated bearer of ideas and the prospects of maintaining the regime in the generations to come. A substantial part of the indoctrination was made mainly through political organizations, but other means, such as radio, press, film, literature or visual media also assisted in successful propagation. However, the degree and specifics of reception of individual visual media tend to be different in history education. While the photographs or posters provide a fairly readable picture of the observed historical phenomena, postage stamps, comic books and caricatures pose a research challenge to describe the topic and to be later applied in school education.

Especially non-democratic regimes, such as the Czechoslovak one in 1948–89, used to use visual media for their own propaganda. ‘Cult of personality’ of the leaders of the Communist Party and of the state was reinforced by the high volumes of printed materials. Cults with symbolic functions played a similar role; they referred to preferred professions, activities, economic intentions or organizations and their exemplary members recognizable by external attributes

and targeted on specific target groups. An unprecedented amount of space was provided to the purpose-oriented depiction of these educational role models for young people, but not only for the purposes of the above-mentioned power holding in the future. By this targeted propaganda it demonstrated legitimacy, which was logically followed by claiming a leading position in the society.

Even a cursory look at the monitored media suggests different approaches to ideologization: In the 1950s, the educational patterns of youth are straightforward and visionary, while approximately from the 1970s to 1989, there is an increasing number of behavioural tiers and actions with an indirect effect. The communist regime probably expected that this new tactic would be more convincing.

The text of the paper is restricted to and focused on these patterns and their suitable examples applicable in the history classes.

Didactic characteristics of the media used

Didactically, the significance of these visual media can be seen in the natural preservation of the original form, whether they are placed in a textbook or projected in the course of a lesson. On the other hand, textual sources are routinely subject to adjustments to take into account the pupils' age and mental capacity. The contemporary artistic design of the postage stamps, comic books or caricatures thus more naturally evokes the historical atmosphere.¹

It is not difficult to trace the original idea behind the use of postage stamps for propaganda purposes: everyone needs postage services; national borders are not an obstacle, so any topic can be effectively promoted not only at home but also in the world. Postal service users were primarily exposed to the effect of these persuasion strategies, followed by stamp collectors as the next target thanks to their passion for interest in postage stamps.² It can be easily explained why the interest in this media subject was expanded to historians, tutors and educators

¹ Rak, J.: *Das Bild der anderen in der tschechischen Karikatur 1848–1948*. In: Becher, P. – Džambo, J. (1997): *Gleiche Bilder, gleiche Worte. Deutsche, Österreicher und Tschechen in der Karikatur 1848–1948*. Munich, p. 9–13; Pernes, J. (2003): *History of Czechoslovakia through the eyes of the Dikobraz magazine 1945–1990*. Praha; (2007) *Die Destruktion des Dialogs: Zur innenpolitischen Instrumentalisierung negativer Fremd- und Feindbilder*. Darmstadt; Karl, P.: *Caricatures in the service of SdP. Satirical magazine "Der Igel" in the years 1935–1938*, In Rokoský J. – Veselý, M. (2013) (eds.): *Place and Memory. Transformations of society in the thirties to sixties of the 20th century*. Ústí nad Labem.

² The very supporting pillar of philately, which is based on the passion to discover imperfections, exceptionalities or shortcomings as a result of work of the team of designers and producers of the stamp is virtually completely omitted in this text for logical reasons. The paper does not fundamentally rely on professional philatelic terminology and also gives up on strict type designation of philatelic material used. Attention is limited to topics of political importance and their didactic reserves.

involved in teaching history (although it was not in a revolutionary way): Stamps represent a pictorial source and contain, similar to text sources, valuable information about the era when they were created. However, for knowledge of history they require the application of appropriate methods of source criticism and for our purposes also an adequate didactic implementation into the history teaching.³ Logically, from the point of view of classification for educational purposes, they belong both to authentic means of teaching and at the same time to the media perceived by senses; and this is the area in which we include the aforementioned photographs, caricatures, posters, painting reproductions, etc. They also constitute a readable source illustrating which traditions and educational models the state body professes; the variable frequency of the subject on the timeline and its form can – in turn – imply the transformations this tradition has undergone.

In connection with the educational use of caricatures, it is advisable to remind ourselves of the well-known fact that they do not represent a documentary material but a concrete opinion. A one-sided point of view, or even a totally erroneous assessment of the reality contained in it, naturally places it alongside other visual media – comic books or the above-mentioned postage stamps.

Similarly, the effect of comic books in the public and non-scientific space is an extremely interesting topic element, although it is very little used in school practice and is still ignored by historiographic research. Comics (as opposed to, for example, film media) require active cooperation of the recipient, who must fill the story and time gaps between the boxes with his or her own thought processes. It means that he or she must contribute to understanding the storyline. The essence of comics forces them to reduction. Only selected moments are filled in the boxes, only selected details are drawn. But it is still a symbolism of places, objects, events and figures. Through the symbols, view angles, contour lines and colours, the experiences of comics characters are brought closer and provide emotions to the story.

Some comics seek historically faithful rendition of stories from the times long past. However, this is not done by depicting historical reality, but rather through artistic imagination. In such a case, they can stimulate the reader's historical consciousness.

³ The inspirational effect of using a postage stamp for classroom teaching lies, among other things, in its potential for an alternative extension of pupils' individual extracurricular hobbies. By promoting philately, we undoubtedly contribute not only to general education and the development of the pupil's history consciousness. When working with postage stamps, also professional and specific philatelic skills are developed and deepened. These – in turn – may support the development of some personal qualities, such as patience, a sense of aesthetics of sorting philatelic material, etc.

Of course, the relation between reality and fable varies considerably, and a systemic arrangement is desirable for meaningful analysis. This issue was, among others, dealt with by H. Pandel, who devised a typology of historically oriented comic books. The lowest level is occupied by the so-called *Funnies*, which only remotely indicate a possible reality and can be used just for the pupil's initial motivation. Higher levels follow with *Comicroman* reflecting real historical environment, *Epochencomic* with realistic depiction of a specific epoch with the absence of famous historical personalities, and *Comic-History*, which requires a certain level of historiographic quality.

Another group called *Quellencomic* uses a graphic artist – a witness of his or her time. The observed events are reflected in the comics genre, which is becoming a valuable source for teaching in the class. The absence of a history topic is therefore not an obstacle to historical use;⁴ on the contrary, it is a good basis for the discovery-based learning of pupil researchers (young school-age researchers) and for the development of critical access to information. The following lines are based on *Quellencomic*. However, given the limited scope of the text and its maximum coherence, it was first necessary to adequately describe the offer of comic books for children and youth.

Analysis and description of information sources used

Attention will be first paid to cartoon stories. In the extracurricular environment, comics represent an important part of historical culture and their

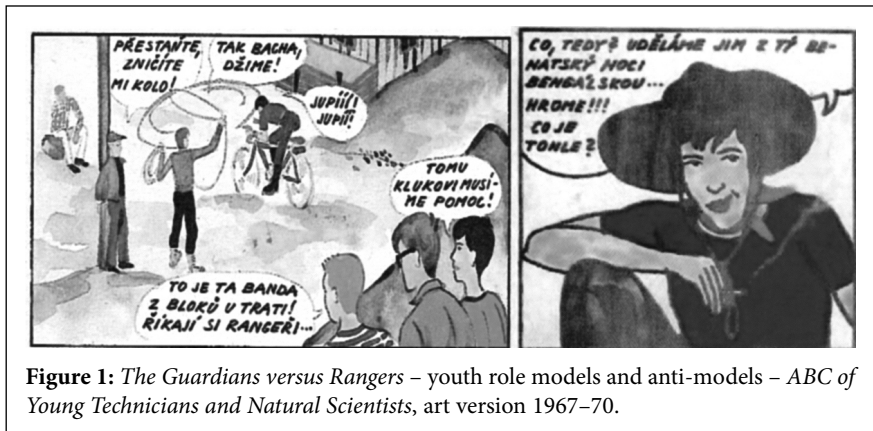


Figure 1: *The Guardians versus Rangers* – youth role models and anti-models – *ABC of Young Technicians and Natural Scientists*, art version 1967–70.

⁴ Pandel, H. J. – Schneider, G. (2005) (eds.): *Handbuch Medien im Geschichtsunterricht*. Schwalbach /Ts., p. 349–353.

implementation into history education is therefore also useful. A comprehensive analysis of available sources revealed the most extensive cycles in the period under review. This characteristic was demonstrated by the stories of the so-called “Modrá pětka” (“Blue Five”) from the magazine *Pionýrská stezka* (*Pioneers’ Trail*), and “Strážci” (“The Guardians”) from the magazine *ABC mladých techniků a přírodovědců* (*ABC of Young Technicians and Natural Scientists*).

The marks of the ideological influence on the youth of the era are exemplarily composed of several layers and represented in a comic book cycle following the adventures of the Guardians; they were therefore eventually chosen as an example.

To begin with, let’s remind ourselves of their legendary predecessors – the five boys “Rychlé šípy” (“Fast Arrows”). Similar to them, also the Guardians are engaged in socially beneficial activities and encourage the youth to spend their free time “in the right way”: They voluntarily and for free clean up public areas, collect recyclable waste, help the elderly and lead younger children to proper behaviour. The list of positive activities includes their fight against smoking, alcohol and other addictive substances. They also help protect public property – in comic book episodes from the 1960s – they, for example, catch vandals damaging phone booths. Today, their cartoon adventures would depict the fight against sprayers.

The cartoon stories of the Guardians are intertwined by confrontation with a marauding gang of the “Rangers”.⁵ In educationally informative stories, these adolescent urchins do not represent a simple analogy to an enemy gang (like “Bratrstvo kočičí pracky” (“Brotherhood of Cat Paws”) against Fast Arrows).

The Rangers gang members do not only embody the opposite of moral and voluntary qualities. Their names, behaviours (riots and brawls instead of adherence to rules) and external attributes (imitations of cowboy clothes) suggest “where” the negative social behaviour comes from (Fig. 1). In the Guardians’ stories, the critical attitude to the “capitalist West” was later supplemented by the negative character of a boy named Bertik, who defiantly wears “western” clothing from *Tuzex*, the store with foreign goods, and professes dubious moral values.⁶

The stories of the Guardians gained the distinctive character of the ideological indoctrination by describing their participation in the military game for pioneers (members of a state –controlled children’s organisation) prepared for them by the military (the “Military Exercise” episode) or in the “Combat Game” prepared by the *People’s Militia* (the “armed fist of the working class”). This impression culminates in the search of the Guardians for the “comrades” involved in the

⁵ The naming of the comic book *Rangers* in the context of the overall behaviour of the gang of adolescent urchins has a clear negative connotation, but historically the role has changed according to commonly available information. From armed groups fighting Indians to riot police, etc.

⁶ Compare: *ABC of Young Technicians and Natural Scientist*, Volume 12/1982-83.

Communist coup d'état of February 1948.⁷ This time, a direct participant in the coup at the local factory became an educational role model for the youth. A simple worker who helped to find and render harmless the owner of the company to be nationalized while he was stealing know-how with the intention of taking it to Western Europe. This episode convincingly demonstrates the thesis of reformulating official patterns into a language close to youth. It illustrates in a sophisticated way the visualisation of the abstract postulate of Marxism about the “legitimate victory of the working class”: The simple worker = the “exploited class”, defeats in the revolutionary days his “exploiter” – the factory owner. An idea was thus installed in the young recipient’s head about a vision of the communist transformation of the world.

The mission of the comic book episode is completed by contemporary ideological clichés in bubbles above the characters: “the reactionaries raise their heads; we will not let them break the Republic...”, etc.

In later stories from the early 1980s, the Guardians are increasingly portrayed with external attributes emphasizing political affiliation – red scarves and other uniform elements. As a result, as “normalization”⁸ progresses, the group of

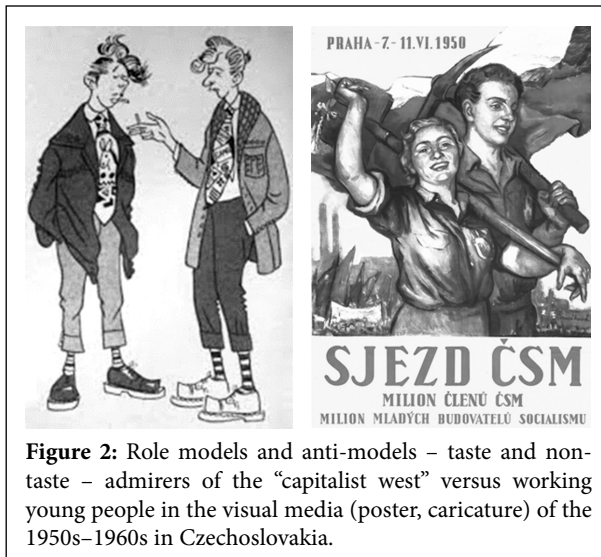


Figure 2: Role models and anti-models – taste and non-taste – admirers of the “capitalist west” versus working young people in the visual media (poster, caricature) of the 1950s–1960s in Czechoslovakia.

⁷ Compare: *ABC of Young Technicians and Natural Scientist, Chronicle of the Guardians* 9–11/1982–83.

⁸ Historical period. Its name comes from the need for the “normalization of the conditions” by the conservative communists after the Soviet invasion, i.e. from the negation of more progressive reforms of the communist regime during the so-called Prague Spring in 1968.

ordinary boys becomes an ideologically engaged group. The Guardians – role models of other pioneer groups.⁹

One of the most important means of modern propaganda undoubtedly includes posters that pass on a direct, simple and clear message to the public.

And this was the reason why children and youth constituted one of the frequent motives on propaganda posters, and at the same time represented an important target group for the posters. Children on posters were most often depicted in uniforms, standing at attention and with a hand outstretched for a pioneer greeting. By this, the importance of organization was underlined. An important element that can be seen on almost every poster is the portrait of a political leader (initially Klement Gottwald, often along with Stalin), who is placed against a red background. Dark red is usually complemented by other distinctive colours, such as yellow or blue. Flags and other ideological symbols are also present. Youth is portrayed as happy, proud and determined to build a new, better world under the auspices of communism.

Understandably, fashion also became one of the tools of youth re-education. Past trends were rejected as bourgeois relics. Since the new social arrangement proclaimed the working man at its forefront, the visual art in the public space corresponded to it. Poster design mainly depicted a young working man and corresponding models of work clothes. The invoked ideals of these garments, such as practicality or modesty, were portrayed in the communist state as a synonym of taste, while Western trends were considered tasteless. The intensified form of this “ideological struggle” was represented by caricatures directed against the so-called “pásek”.¹⁰ The term “pásek” was used for non-conforming youth refusing to comply with enforced rules. In the satirical magazine *Dikobraz*, many artists, illustrators and lyricists got involved in the fight against those who preferred eccentric clothing, combed-up hair, western music or western dance trends.

⁹ The *Guardians* followed the genre model of their legendary *Fast Arrow* predecessors (from Series 3 as the *Chronicle of the Guardians*). Individual stories encourage young people to spend their leisure “in the right way”. They were published in *ABC*, the magazine for youth, popularizing science and technology (1967–70, 1972–73, 1981–84). Although it is one of the most extensive domestic comic book series – the fragmental period in which they were published does not guarantee a consistent assessment of the indoctrination of the era and the interpretation can therefore be formulated only with limited validity.

¹⁰ In September 1953, Czechoslovak citizens could follow the court trial with a group of juvenile delinquents; propagandists took advantage of this trial to massively campaign against alien fashion, “Western” music genres, and the obscene dances of this group of the unyielding young people. The then authors and artists, Bohumil Štěpán, František Skála, Ondřej Sekora, Josef Žemlička, Ctirad Smolka and Jaroslav Malák, ridiculed them not only through caricatures of the “perverted” youth, but also in a continuing series of the humorous periodical *Dikobraz* during 1954.

Working clothes for housewives also posed a big topic; an extremely peculiar thing was the design of suits for the *Czechoslovak Youth Union* and the women of the *Communist Party of Czechoslovakia*. The resulting image in the visual media was affected by this fight – it demonstrated similar contrasts. (Fig. 2)

The contemporary issues of postage stamps were also meant to assure the recipient of the driving forces of the new society and ideological priorities. With a strong didactic accent, they presented – especially to young citizens – the working patterns of smiling miners with hidden meanings, such as: “Mining – heroic and honest occupation; socialist competition to meet the plan”; they also displayed blue-collar professions and equally optimistic workers in agricultural cooperatives. In this way they tried to support work ethics. There are also signs indicating the importance of physical fitness, but also women as the mothers of the families. Other stamps promote cults with symbolic functions: peace, tolerance and freedom. Unlike the Soviet stamps in the so-called perestroika period, however, there is no open criticism of the negative social phenomena that the communist leadership had to deal with – such as alcoholism. Similar to them, the propaganda of economic intentions on the postage stamps of the communist regime promoted the only imaginable model for the development of society. The foundation and congresses of the Czechoslovak Youth Union (ČSM), Socialist Youth Union (SSM) and Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) were repeatedly reminded; they were depicted by young, happy and determined faces. Other themes included uniformed children and youth or members of mass leisure organizations managed by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, demonstrating exemplary activities and behaviour (Fig. 3). Portraits of political leaders, mostly of V. I. Lenin, were repeated (1949 – twice 1954, 1960, 1970, but also in 1990!).

Didactic impulses for model analyses

Being inspired by Pandel’s typology of comics, we can formulate a variety of general as well as completely specific didactic stimuli. Comparison with postage stamps and caricatures can be used as a wider version.

Tasks for pupils: First, find out the basic information about the information source. The author (his/her profession on the Internet, whether he/she is qualified in history, etc.); the content of the story. The relevant boxes can stimulate factual, contextual and/or attitude questions: Do you favour any of the characters? Why? Find arguments in favour and against. Define examples of suitable and inappropriate behaviour. Find boxes in the comic books to illustrate specific examples of positive and negative behaviour patterns. Examine and see if the comic books contain other examples of such exemplary behaviour, which in addition demonstrate political attitudes. Mark the external signs of the political affiliation of those depicted (pioneer scarves, etc.).

Decide which of the comic stories is trying to give you the most knowledge (write down some examples); which can most impress your attitudes and feelings; whether any of them criticizes violence, unhealthy habits, or risky behaviour in general: justify and illustrate it by examples.

Note the realism or stylization of the drawings. Note the colour presentation (warm, cool colours). Think about the possible reasons. Describe whether and how they influence the overall impression or your feelings. In comic book boxes, search to find objects, figures, gestures, or phenomena that play the role of a symbol. Complete in a creative way, fill in spaces or texts.

The main theme of the comic books followed is the story of a boy group. Isolated application in teaching would be problematic, but with help of other didactic media they offer a suitable tool for concretising the pupils' abstract ideas of ideological indoctrination by totalitarian regimes. Tasks: Compare specific boxes containing memories of communist workers with an extract of a text written by a historian. In different media, identify the forms of ideological influence on youth (posters, caricatures). Think about congruences and differences. Note the differences between contemporary and current evaluation. Think about the influence and significance of educational role models and anti-models for young people. Provide examples of comic book boxes, caricatures, or posters that depict



Figure 3: Postage stamps with educational promotion of the “right” activities of children and politically organized youth (Pioneer, SSM, ČSM) – vanguard of the Communist Party.

their particular form or behaviour. Quote the content of comic book bubbles, postage stamp text, or caricature commentaries to prove it. It is possible to conduct a controlled discussion with the pupils on the topic of the meaning and value of educational models; whether they are influenced by democratic and undemocratic development, or whether they are still of importance to us today.

The aim of a controlled discussion or dialogue with pupils is not to simply reject or identify. We compare opinions of the pupils with interpretations of historians, factual data, statistical data, and lists of the consequences of contemporary approaches. We discuss the possible effectiveness and limits of this form of education and ideological indoctrination.

Although the comics *Guardians* and *Chronicle of the Guardians*, postage stamps with educational models for youth and caricatures mocking admirers of the “capitalist West” were not primarily intended for education in the class, they can be used. Because readers rather lack the contemporary context, which cannot be ascertained only through classical teaching, we can entrust pupil researchers to process a number of simple factual, conceptual or contextual tasks. Under the guidance of the teacher they will use verified information sources where they compare the data and supplement or provide missing interpretations. Our aim is to develop pupils’ competences in the field of reflected critical discovery and evaluation of information and, as a result, to deepen history consciousness.

Summary

Finally, it should be stressed that, understandably, the frequency, urgency and form of the messages provided by visual media were changing over the period under review. The extract presented here does not consistently cover the period observed – it adapts to what was offered – and its informative value is therefore limited. Comics and postage stamps, unlike caricatures and posters, represent an underestimated means of depicting the cultural and historical context such a phenomenon as indoctrination of the youth in totalitarian regimes and, at the same time, can complement the spectrum of commonly analysed media in the school environment.

Based on the description and analysis carried out, it can be stated that Stalin’s educational patterns for the youth of the 1950s act in a visionary and literal manner, while in the period of the so-called normalization of the 1970s and 1980s, they have more layers and act more covertly. The above findings generate further questions at the same time: For example, the contemporary effect of this indoctrination on the target group. The mentioned aspects, i.e. the changes in the media pressure and the effect, are therefore an interesting stimulus for further research into didactics and media education in teaching history.