

Visegrad Scholarship at the Open Society Archives

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Cursed Soldiers in the light of documentary film propaganda 1945-1953

Final report

The name “Cursed Soldiers” refers to the Polish anti-communist resistance movements, formed in the last stages of World War II, whose struggle persisted well in 1950s¹. The abovementioned expression is quite broad and applies to members of the variety of organizations. Some of them were military formations (i.a. *Narodowe Siły Zbrojne* [National Armed Forces (NSZ)], *Narodowe Zjednoczenie Wojskowe* [National Military Union (NZW)], *Konspiracyjne Wojsko Polskie* [Underground Polish Army (KWP)] etc.), other preferred political rather, than military means (e.g. *Wolność i Niezawisłość* [Freedom and Independence (WIN)]). Some of Cursed Soldiers decided to continue the struggle, because they rejected the Yalta arrangements owing to which Poland, a former member of anti-Nazi coalition, was supposed to become one of USSR satellites. Others were compelled to join partisans because of the severe repressions imposed by communists upon the members of the military formations of the former Polish Underground State as the potential threat for the newly installed regime. The aforementioned term applies also to the civilians cooperating with these organizations. The ways of oppression include i.a. murders, arrests, tortures, show trials, imprisonment, death sentences² etc. Cursed Soldiers were also exposed to severe propaganda attacks, quite effective in the long-term, since this subject still is controversial in Poland – despite the collapse of the system.

The contents related to these campaigns were distributed by a variety of channels: press, radio broadcasts, posters, films etc. My project was planned as a study on the documentary film propaganda in the period specified above as a part of this campaign. In my research I focused on the newsreels from the first stages of the regime. Given the fact they were sometimes

¹ The last partisan, Józef Franczak alias (i.a.) “Lalek”, “Laluś” was killed in 1963 (see Gut, Violetta. 2004. *Józef Franczak ps. "Lalek" : ostatni partyzant poakowskiego podziemia*. Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń, Poland).

² See e.g. Kurtyka, Janusz. 2004. *Światy przeciwstawne: komunistyczna bezpieka wobec podziemia*. “Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość”, 1 (5), pp. 11-21.

exchanged with the relevant foreign institutions³, it seemed more likely to find any reference to them in foreign media, which would be helpful in order to estimate (if possible) the impact of the propaganda against Cursed Soldiers not only onto Polish, but also on its foreign recipients.

In case of newsreels the main pretexts to relate to the title issue were: show trials, various acts of sabotage, and funerals of new regime's proponents or officers of security services killed by Cursed Soldiers. In general the documentaries referring to show trials appear quite convergent with the corresponding radio broadcasts and press releases, although for obvious reasons much more concise than the latter ones. The reason for these similarities is quite simple: the information policy on certain crucial matters was controlled by the regime. For instance, the general framework for presentation of show trials was constituted in the circular of Stanisław Radkiewicz (the Minister of Public Security of those days), issued in 1946⁴. In the same year the Main Office of Control of Press, Publications and Shows (Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk) was created as the governmental organ responsible for censorship in Poland. Despite the fact that the film art undeniably has the potential of a powerful tool for influencing the masses, the newsreels do not seem to play the most important role at the initial stages of the campaign against Cursed Soldiers. Film crews are not even mentioned in Radkiewicz's circular. Films seem to play merely an auxiliary role to other media covering show trials (especially the radio⁵).

Methods of propaganda employed due to the aforementioned campaigns were multiple, diversified, and not always easily detectable. For instance, the propaganda materials might be grounded upon distorted factual component, hard to verify for the average recipient. It must be noted that security services had plenty of possibilities to produce convenient "facts", including i.a. planting the forged evidence to incriminate a political enemy, forcing arrestees

³ For instance, a newsreel from 1946 relating to the act of sabotage on the monument of the Heroes of the People's Army and the Red Army in Łódź was exchanged with: Unio News, Metro-News (M. Ns.) (USA), and Actualités Françaises (see the description of *Demonstracja pod pomnikiem Wyzwolenia w Łodzi / Demonstration under the Liberation Monument in Łódź*, Polska Kronika Filmowa [Polish Film Journals, PKF] No 6/46, Wytwórnia Filmowa Wojska Polskiego, URL: <http://www.repozytorium.fn.org.pl/?q=pl/node/4116#.VZ7nSFNwBH0> [accessed: February 20th, 2015]).

⁴ See Musiał, Filip. 2004. *Procesy pokazowe w Polsce 1944-1955*. "Zeszyty Historyczne Stowarzyszenia Żołnierzy Armii Krajowej", No 6, pp. 52-61; Wołoszyn, Jacek. 2011. *Konspiracja młodzieżowa na ziemiach polskich w latach 1944-1956*, "Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość" 1(17), p. 68 ft. 86.

⁵ In one of RFE Informational Items dated on 1954 the source mentions that the main mean for the propaganda is the radio (see "Communist Propaganda", 5 March 1952. [Electronic record.] HU OSA 300-1-2-16539; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest. URI: <http://hdl.handle.net/10891/osa:8debd3a3-b21a-4882-966c-2cc596fb5844> [accessed: July 12th, 2015])

to confirm false information during often very brutal interrogations⁶ (and corroborate the accusations posed later on in the course of a show trial), as well as provocations of a more sophisticated kind – such as forming the fake “partisan group” committing crimes (attacks, murders, plunders and the like) in order to manipulate the public opinion⁷. Consequently, such practices may result in distorted picture of the given state of affairs, one of the most crucial element of propaganda attack – especially when it is corroborated by another component: corresponding distorted information provided by the media. The scope of means for such manipulation is at least as broad and diversified, as of the former one. It may involve e.g. careful selection of the “convenient” pieces of information and neglecting the “inconvenient” ones⁸, introduction of persuasive elements into the verbal layer of the message, and the like – in order to create a designed picture of events.

All these components are reflected also in the aforementioned newsreels. Unlike the radio transmissions, though, films are also able to corroborate the message by the elements of the visual layer. In this light newsreels seem to be an excellent carrier for the propaganda, as they might be portrayed as a combination of a neutral (journalistic) content and a work of a film art. Yet, initially this potential was seized to the limited extent, as it appears. In the documentaries in question the verbal layer clearly dominates over the visual one. The emphasis is put on the commentary, which is full of persuasive elements (“felony”, “a murder”, “a gang” and the like⁹). At the same time the artistic means in these materials are often simplified and – to put it elegantly – fail to impress the recipient. The problem does not boil down to the mediocre filmmakers. The head of the team of Polish Film Journals [PKF] was Jerzy Bossak, who was awarded at international film festivals in the period specified

⁶ See i.a. Śmietanka-Kruszelnicki, Ryszard. 2003. *Protokół przesłuchania jako źródło historyczne*, “Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość”, 1 (3), p. 201.

⁷ It should be noted that provocations could serve for other purposes – for instance as the method of working out the target environment. Kurtyka 2004, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17. See also e.g. “UB Organizes ‘Partisan Unit’ for Provocative Reasons”, 26 November 1951. [Electronic record.] HU OSA 300-1-2-11579; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest. URI: <http://hdl.handle.net/10891/osa:8be784f7-a5b4-473b-bb6c-27157b407743> [accessed: June 29th, 2015]

⁸ There are sometimes significant differences between stenographic records of the trials and corresponding press releases. (Musiał, Filip. 2002. *Między prawdą a propagandą. Przebieg procesu krakowskiego na sali sądowej i w propagandzie komunistycznej (11 VIII – 10 IX 1947)*, “Zeszyty Historyczne WiN-u”, No 18, pp. 163-210).

⁹ All channels mirror the same strategies of discrediting Cursed Soldiers adopted in the course of aforementioned trials. They were intended to portray Cursed Soldiers as common criminals driven by no noble aims, nor values, save financial benefits, degenerates presenting “fascist”, “anti-Soviet”, “anti-Semitic”, “antidemocratic” attitudes (including the accusations of collaboration with Nazis, in spite of the fact that military agencies of Polish Underground State fought with them during WWII) etc. (see e.g. Musiał 2002, *op. Cit.*, pp. 16, 25-29).

above¹⁰. Neither is it the lack of conventions, because some of them had been already constituted (e.g. Leni Riefenstahl works before WWII, Frank Capra's excellent "Why We Fight" series). Radkiewicz's instructions concerned mainly the informational content of the reports, not the elements of the visual layer. This phenomenon may be partly explained by the fact that sometimes it is the convention related to a given kind of material (e.g. a report on a funeral) that dictates some elements of the film structure, sometimes the particular circumstances (e.g. the requirements of filmmaking during the trial) may also limit the range of possible artistic means. At the same time, however, it is apparent that Polish newsreels concerning show trials of Cursed Soldiers resemble Soviet documentary materials of the same kind¹¹. The simplicity of these documentaries corresponds well with the social realist reluctance to more sophisticated formal means. Perhaps, then, there is also another possible explanation for abovementioned phenomenon - that the newsreels merely copied or were expected to copy the Soviet patterns, with no reference to the Western traditions¹².

In time the more sophisticated means to structure the visual layer of these materials began to be employed, yet similarity to both: other parts of the media cover and to Soviet patterns still remained apparent.

Due to the research project I have explored following items of the OSA collections:

- Films
- American propaganda documentaries
 - Capra Frank, *Why We Fight: Prelude to War*, USA, 1942, FL 612
 - Capra Frank, *Why We Fight: War Comes to America*, USA, 1942, FL 607
 - Capra Frank, *Why We Fight: The Nazis Strike*, USA, 1943, FL 610
 - Capra Frank, *Why We Fight: The Battle of Russia*, USA, 1943, FL 605
 - Capra Frank, *Why We Fight: Know Your Enemy*, USA, 1945, FL 611

¹⁰ In 1947 he won the first prize as the Best Short Film at the Cannes Film Festival for a documentary film "Powódź" (The Floods), made of materials prepared for the sake of newsreels. He was also one of the fathers of the renowned Polish School of Documentary Movies (HU OSA FL 1730-1731).

¹¹ For instance, to some extent the documentary film materials on sixteen leaders of the Polish Underground State, kidnapped to Moscow in 1945 to put into a show trial there (see the film of Dusiewicz Włodzimierz *Szesnastu. Proces Polityczny z Moskwy*, Poland, 1989).

¹² Some of the comments on Polish films seem to imply that traditions of the Polish film industry did not exist before 1944, which is false. Nevertheless, such an implication seems to be rather to the advantage of the supposition, that film industry was expected to start quite anew, without the "burden" of capitalistic traditions (and to rest on the Soviet ones). See "Soviet Press -- Comments on Polish Popular Democratic Films", 30 December 1954. [Electronic record] HU OSA 300-1-2-54097; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest. URI: <http://hdl.handle.net/10891/osa:fa708cbf-effd-462c-8b6e-cf2ade77d898> [accessed: June 29th, 2015], p. 2.

Face to Face with Communism, USA, 1951, FL 269

- Chiaureli Mikhail, *Незабываемый 1919-й* (The Unforgettable Year 1919), USSR, 1951, FL 217
- Polish School of Documentary Movies, NInA Publishing's series: “Czarna seria” (The Black Series), ed. Tadeusz Sobolewski : FL 1730, FL 1731, FL 1732
 - HU OSA 300-50-1: 25, 31, 32, 35, 135, 161, 188, 214, 220, 430, 449, 451, 465, 502, 837, 838, 839, 843, 844, 848, 1026
 - HU OSA 300-50-3: 8
 - Electronic records at the OSA Digital Repository:
- Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute; General Records; Information Items; HU OSA 300-1-2 (items: 687, 874, 2526, 2649, 6383, 9528, 9625, 9908, 10167, 11579, 12943, 16539, 18960, 20435, 25260, 26875, 27448, 28704, 30126, 32666, 32669, 33422, 38826, 41923, 47747, 47968, 49897, 54097)
- Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute; Publications Department; Background Reports; HU OSA 300-8-3 items: 4124, 4129)

Analysis of the films from the OSA Film Collection provided me with more profound knowledge about the techniques of film propaganda used during the first stages of the post-war world. Additionally, I was also hoping that I would be able to find in the OSA collections some sound information on the impact of the Polish propaganda film materials on the recipients of the Western Bloc in those days. However, the archival material of this kind, as it turned out, is rather scarce and of more general nature. The resources I have found most valuable with the respect to the issue of the abroad reception the Polish propaganda come from the Polish emigration newspapers, paragraphs in Western newspapers referring to certain show trials or acts of sabotage, and reports on the Polish propaganda against the Western countries (mainly HU OSA 300-50-1). Also some items of Digital Repository mention the matters of propaganda documentaries (HU OSA 300-1-2 and HU OSA 300-8-3). Due to this research and owing to some materials from abovementioned OSA collections I was able to limit and clarify certain hypotheses on the methods of propaganda in the first stages of communistic regime in the post-war Poland, yet this part of my work requires