

# American Idol: American Pop Culture and Soft Power in Cold War Europe

*Rochelle Nowaki  
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During the period of the Cold War, the influence of American popular culture in Eastern European nations was profound despite the tightly controlled program of censorship of oppressive regimes. The infusion of U.S. propaganda through music, art, dance, and motion pictures reinforced American patriotism and spread the sunny images of freedom, choice, wealth, abundance, and opportunity across distant political borders. These repetitive messages provided fuel for sparking dissent within the black market audience of oppressed people who desired the liberties and freedoms portrayed in American media. In the last seventy years, the tenacious marketing of American culture was deployed as a transforming catalyst of change to provoke social movements, instigate challenges to Communist ideology, and encourage the destabilization of Communism.

Psychological warfare was a strategic tool of U.S. foreign policy implemented during the Truman Administration to drop propaganda across Communist borders and incite dissent in Eastern Europe. Psywarfare was a complementary, non-military action program to assist Containment policies that disseminated American culture through popular media: music, movies, books, and art. The concept included the distribution of American policy and information through unofficial modes such as advertisements, magazines and artworks along with disparaging news about Communist activities abroad. These methods would expand to a promotion and marketing of American culture, known as Americanization, whose beginnings originated through industrialization in the early twentieth century. Europeans held a fascination with American culture, industry, technology, and traditions, which appealed to the egos of the newly rich industrialists and upper crust classes. "The wealth generated by the industrial revolution created a strong sense of noblesse oblige" that members of the elite classes "agreed that their nation's status as a world power entailed global responsibilities" of serving as a model for developing nations and spreading American-ness around the world.<sup>1</sup>

Humanitarian projects during World War II accomplished beneficial efforts in regions targeted for vital resource pools or strategic geographic sites. The Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA) implemented medical projects to "combat diseases such as malaria, dysentery, and tuberculosis" and the Institute for Inter-American Affairs was responsible for improving medical services through coordinated efforts with local health ministries to "improve sanitation and

sewage, develop preventive medicine programs" and construction of hospitals and public health centers. These two efforts fostered goodwill in these regions and "reflected the idealistic, as well as pragmatic, side of the wartime Good Neighbor policy."<sup>2</sup> Post-war humanitarian projects were built upon the experiences of the CIAA and IIAA and driven by the goals of U.S. foreign policy.

The Office of War Information (OWI) was created to implement psywarfare through untraditional methods by wielding soft power and marketing America "through a Marshall Plan in the field of ideas."<sup>3</sup> The "OWI censored the press and churned out posters, magazines, comic books, films, and cartoons to undermine enemy morale and sell the war and U.S. war aims to allies and neutrals,"<sup>4</sup> in an effort to appeal to the social and emotional needs and win the hearts and minds of citizens in Communist regions. Plans included providing literature, academic information, music, and arts to combat Communist ideology. Implementation of these efforts would also provide literacy, improve intelligence, and mental fortitude to maintain a constant conflict and undermine Communist influences.

Part of this effort included book distribution programs that were funded to promote literacy, covertly through the CIA. The initial program was designed as a distribution through the mail. Flyers contained carefully devised book choices to push western ideology, democratic notions, and American ideals and were deployed into Eastern Europe via balloons. The Congress for Cultural Freedom was another program deployed by the CIA to "organize and fund such events as art exhibits, literary symposia, and tours by the Yale Glee Club" with monies distributed by the Ford Foundation, Time, Incorporated, and the Rockefeller Foundation.<sup>5</sup>

Broadcast programs of American music, news, and information over Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were instrumental in keeping America consciously present and maintaining an active disturbing role in Communist environments. Misinformation and rumor-mongering were also deployed as tactics to create doubt and resistance to Communist protocols using "émigré broadcasters to beam...bare-knuckled propaganda denouncing the evils of Soviet imperialism, mocking Communism through satirical skits, and using American popular culture, especially jazz, to subvert East European youth."<sup>6</sup> These programs were implemented in the hopes that citizens living under non-free states would find impetus for voicing or demonstrating dissatisfaction with their current political system.

## Generation Teen

Postwar American culture was the perfect setting for creation of the teenager demographic, a new social standing within middle-class that reaped the freedoms and benefits of wealth and opportunity that resulted from America's thriving economy. "The teenage world became American...a never-ending and yet happy-ending advertisement for the American way-of-life

and for American goods."<sup>7</sup> The younger generation in European nations could identify with American Teens over common personal struggles that arise with maturity: communication frustration with older generations, developing self-identity, and adjustment to social customs within their peer groups. They were fascinated with the trends and interests of young Americans who enjoyed leisure, freer lifestyles, and desired the new youth culture. American teen life was an aspiration for youth who sought to find their place on the cool kids' table. "Abundance brought the fruition of American consumer culture" and with the advent of disposable income, the teenage demography became an influential market over which U.S. foreign policy propaganda would wave a mighty wand.<sup>8</sup>

Teen-oriented publications were prime tools for disseminating American pop culture to masses abroad. They provided visual examples of the new consumerism that fueled a desire to have the same freedoms and choices and material goods as the American teens depicted. Coupled with radio broadcasts over Voice of America and Radio Free Europe that pushed a "Top 40"-type music format, the marketing of American culture was formulated to perpetuate American values and lifestyle subconsciously influencing the innocent youth abroad towards a more liberated position.

### Stilyagi

The Stilyagi movement started underground after World War II when returning soldiers found adjustment to rigid Soviet life difficult after exposure to foreign culture abroad. It was initially rooted in youth culture and the search for self-identity, defying the older generations, and manifested as a fashion-oriented movement inspired by 1940s Western cinema and music. Exposure to American culture in Europe was inevitable because U.S. studios now dominated the film industry. Jazz and rock and roll were popular U.S. imports and although deemed subversive material by Communist cultural authorities, youth everywhere and indeed, the Stilyagi, had much material to draw upon for inspiration. They were considered a "serious challenge to Soviet ideology, not because they were numerous or powerful but because they were the first manifestation of a new phenomenon for which the country was ideologically unprepared."<sup>9</sup>

The rise of Stilyagi in 1956 "coincided with a renewed surge of urbanization...and with the reduction of the working day from eight to six hours for sixteen to eighteen year olds."<sup>10</sup> Western haircuts and vibrant, American style clothing allowed the style hunters and trendsetter to symbolically express their individuality and expand their youthful rebellion into a form of political and social dissent. Stilyagi wielded style as a weapon against government oppression.

By the 1950s, foreigners visiting the Soviet Union were the primary source of Stilyagi inspiration, importing magazines, newspapers, and music "intended

as gifts for friends."<sup>11</sup> These items became gold in the Soviet black market. Clever individuals began engraving old X-ray films, "the cheapest and most readily available source of necessary plastic," reproducing the smuggled, outlawed music onto plates depicting broken bones and vertebrae, nicknamed "bones" or "ribs," and sold the low-quality bootlegs for "a ruble or a ruble and a half."<sup>12</sup> The 'records on bones' were produced on "simple technology available in street-corner booths where homesick soldiers could record messages to their mothers" and soon "hijacked to produce millions of cheap copies of 'Rock Around the Clock' and "music taped from Western radio stations."<sup>13</sup>

Chubby Checker's "Let's Twist Again" was the impetus for the explosion of black-market bones and Komsomol patrols tasked with confiscating the music were forced to aim their focus on major bootleg profiteers instead of the mass numbers of kids who bought them. The risks involved in purchasing the bones was high, with some instances resulting in a seven-year stay in the Gulag<sup>14</sup> and "the sound quality was terrible, but the X-ray records felt like the real thing to rock-starved kids who could hear 'See You Later, Alligator' on a shadowy image of some babushka's lungs."<sup>15</sup> Bootleg and black-market music played a vital role in providing these audiences with affirmation of ideas they shared with open societies but were unable to express freely. Sarajevo musician Goran Bregovic posed this as one of the reasons for rock 'n' roll's influence on young generations when he stated:

Rock 'n' roll in communist countries has much more importance than rock 'n' roll in the West. We can't have any alternative parties or any alternative organized politics. So there are not too many places where you can gather large groups of people and communicate ideas, which are not official. Rock 'n' roll is one of the most important vehicles for helping people in communist countries to think in a different way.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, the collective appreciation of western music was an act of rebellion that openly drew ire from Soviet leaders. Nikita Khrushchev attended one performance by the Benny Goodman Orchestra who embarked on a five-city tour in 1962. It was alleged that "despite Khrushchev's distaste for jazz" his attendance was marked in his joining of the applause.<sup>17</sup> The Goodman Orchestra's tour was the first American band to perform on Soviet soil in thirty years and its outstanding success was a sign that cultural freedoms were slowly emerging.

### Roots of Rebellion in Music

The connection these rebellious youth had to rock 'n' roll and rhythm and jazz, came from the origins of the music itself and their creation in the African American community, a unique blend of African folk style within the traditional framework of European music. These unique styles reflected the emotions and desire

for freedom from suppression and racism experienced by generations of Americans who were discriminated and treated as sub-human because of their skin color. Popular acceptance of these genres across the United States was mixed because of the racial link to its black roots; any outward acceptance of the music would equate tolerance. Still, jazz and rock and roll were emerging as the popular trends in music.

Among the younger generations, rock 'n' roll and jazz were enthusiastically embraced and especially in Soviet nations, music audiences found parallels in their political systems and social oppression, and the music's vibrant roots. "This new generation, having lost faith in the Soviet leadership, sought out new leaders and, as in the West, many turned to rock musicians for spiritual guidance in a society widely perceived as lacking in morality."<sup>18</sup> The music's popularity in the East also drew criticism of the U.S. and its problem with racism. African American musicians who were discriminated and not allowed liberty and freedoms in the Jim Crow South enjoyed free travel and activities abroad. Diplomatic affairs between the U.S. and Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War were tinged with veiled references to American racism and the criticism of treatment of Communist citizens. Dean Acheson strongly suggested the U.S. "must address the issue of racial injustice to deprive the Communists of 'the most effective kind of ammunition for their propaganda warfare' and eliminate a 'source of constant embarrassment to this government in the day-to-day conduct of its foreign relations.'"<sup>19</sup>

### **The King Visits Germany**

Elvis Presley proved to be an international ambassador of American culture when he served for two years in Germany with the armored tank division of the U.S. Army in 1958. The King of rock 'n' roll was sent to help shore up defenses against the Soviet buildup during the Berlin Crisis and his international celebrity presence proved to be a disturbing factor for keeping American culture out of the East. Presley's charisma and overt sexuality grated against Communist conservatives. His performances were deemed so unsettling that references to his concerts in a 1956 *Der Spiegel* article commented that "American youths at Presley concerts were dancing by themselves 'like haunted medicine men of a jungle tribe governed only by musicrock 'n' roll.'"<sup>20</sup>

The young generation further pushed definitions of social norms and gender roles through their musical preferences with growing open rebellion. Presley fan clubs often formed in state-run youth clubs and "in at least thirteen East German cities and towns, "Presley admirers," aged sixteen to twenty-one, had formed gangs of fifteen to twenty, among them girls."<sup>21</sup> Presley's female fan-base demonstrated a loyalty to their idol that troubled the older generations. "In spite of, or perhaps because of, the negative reporting about American and German female rock 'n' roll fans, and in spite of the negative reactions of numerous parents, many German

girls made it publicly known that they liked Elvis" and further, "East Berlin girls stated their support for Presley by wearing his name on the back of their jeans."<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, American culture, deployed through the King of rock 'n' roll, had a profound effect upon German teens, influencing their definitions of social and gender roles and providing examples of un-German behavior to admire. German authorities declared the "rock 'n' roll atmosphere caused by the United States responsible for rowdiness, the formation of cliques, rape, and "perverted behavior" in the East."<sup>23</sup> The purported improper female behavior was equated with the image of western, American woman. The challenge to gender roles in new demonstrations of female assertiveness were likely born from the teen rebellion, but also arose as counterpart with the rise in feminism in the United States.

In the German Democratic Republic (GDR), "a report submitted to the secretariat in December 1959, covered incidents ranging from rock 'n' roll protests to robberies to illegal trips to West Germany" allegedly to gather with other rebels.<sup>24</sup> The response by German authorities on both sides included increased policing of the youth clubs, imprisonment for juvenile delinquency and rebellious activities, and directing "the police, the Interior Ministry, and the Ministry for People's Education, to take measures to better detect and act upon rowdy behavior."<sup>25</sup> Control over this rebellious generation seemed to shift from strict reinforcing of prohibitions on outlawed behaviors to an acknowledgement that rock 'n' roll was there to stay. Management of rebel youth activity and prevention of delinquency and petty crimes was more efficient in the locations they occupied.

Collaborative events by musicians and social activists grew in popularity in the United States during the 1960s with the Civil Rights movement. Like-minded Americans gathered to celebrate shared values and political views. The anti-war, anti-Vietnam climate was an umbrella environment that allowed for the gathering of different social groups including counterculture-hippies, students, Vietnam Veterans, feminists, minority groups and others who were angry at the long and ill-fated war. A cultural milestone for the Peace movement was the Woodstock Music and Art Fair of 1969 was billed as "3 Days of Peace and Music." Over 300,000 festivalgoers gathered to celebrate life in music, peace, love and harmony, as a demonstration of their shared ideology. Undoubtedly, the Woodstock effect was observed abroad in other ethnic forms.

### **Singing Revolution**

The Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, lost their independence in 1939 through Soviet invasion following the non-aggression agreement with Germany, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which divided the geographic buffer zone into corresponding spheres of influence. The installation of Communist leaders in each nation through rigged elections in 1940

was soon followed by annexation into the Soviet Union.

Estonia's Song Festival was first organized in 1869 as a national unification event in Tallinn. The Estonian tradition of song and music was historically integral to building and reinforcing solidarity of the people and as a social display of their national pride. Laulupidu gained considerable cultural acknowledgement as a social protest activity during the fight for independence of the Baltic States. The "Singing Revolution" of the late 1980s in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania demonstrated resistance against the Russian regime. Mass demonstrations were organized in Tallinn, in 1988, where they gathered initially to sing songs of Estonian national pride and patriotism, music that was outlawed by Soviet occupation.

Summer music festivals were transformed into political protest events where, initially, tens of thousands of Estonians and soon after, hundreds of thousands of Estonians united in song to openly demonstrate their desire for independence. At Laulupidu, in September 1988, over 300,000 Estonians gathered to demonstrate and collectively demand sovereignty from the USSR, sparking a movement towards independence.<sup>26</sup> The movement gained more political sway as the Soviet Union weakened and in 1991, Estonians finally won independence.

The Estonian festival has been held every five years with ever increasing attendance; in recent decades, Laulupidu gained recognition by drawing top international talent, choirs, and singing groups who were invited to audition to live audiences of over 100,000 people. The festival's importance in Estonian history, culture, and traditions was apparent at the 2009 during 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration event that was noted for participation by over 34,000 singers.<sup>27</sup>

U.S. policies enacted programs and campaigns to wield American soft power during the Cold War era around the globe. The resulting effects of these influences are found today in the global presence of American popular culture in music, art, clothing and language. No longer are top Hollywood box office stars considered only American celebrities but instead, they find larger, influential fan-bases abroad. The various international subgenres of rap and hip-hop music remain proof of the connection to and influence of social and political themes reflected in the music's black American roots and the influence of American-created Music Television (MTV). Basketball, a modern, American-invented sport, is now a popular activity in countless countries around the world. In many ways, technology has been a tool for furthering the influence of American soft power. The prevalence and popularity of teenage trends almost undeniably originate in the United States, and today, ideas disseminate via Internet and social media like viral epidemics. Technological advances of the last five decades have linked distant people together and created a global community that reacts and communicates as

if physical distance were irrelevant. These connections foster further cross-cultural exchanges and change the manner of doing diplomatic work.

The global community is also indicative of the interwoven relationships between nations and powerful non-governmental organizations, which are often global corporations who are no longer centrally established in the United States. Economic agendas and responses to foreign market demands are now chief concerns in foreign policy dealings and diplomacy between nations with prime investments in these corporations. American soft power wields a significant power today but the global market interests of the multi-national corporations are undoubtedly growing much more influential in policy making. It remains unclear how the influence of American soft power during the Cold war era will inform and dictate future international relations in a shrinking global community. However, the imprint of Americanization and American popular culture is undoubtedly awesome.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 342.

<sup>2</sup>George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 557.

<sup>3</sup>A. Ross Johnson, *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty: The CIA Years and Beyond*, (Chicago: Stanford University Press, 2010): 4.

<sup>4</sup>George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 542.

<sup>5</sup>George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 649.

<sup>6</sup>George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 649.

<sup>7</sup>Reinhold Wagnleitner, "American Cultural Diplomacy, The Cinema, and The Cold War in Central Europe," *Hollywood in Europe: Experiences of a Cultural Hegemony*, edited by Ellwood, David W., and Rob Kroes, (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994): 206.

<sup>8</sup>George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 654.

<sup>9</sup>Hilary Pilkington, *Russia's Youth and its Culture: A nation's constructors and constructed*, (New York: Routledge, 1994): 67.

<sup>10</sup>Hilary Pilkington, *Russia's Youth and its Culture: A nation's constructors and constructed*, (New York: Routledge, 1994): 67.

- <sup>11</sup>*Soviet Youth Culture*, edited by Jim Riordan. (London: The Macmillan Press, 1989): 47.
- <sup>12</sup>*Soviet Youth Culture*, edited by Jim Riordan. (London: The Macmillan Press, 1989): 47.
- <sup>13</sup>Leslie Woodhead, *How the Beatles Rocked the Kremlin: The Untold Story of a Noisy Revolution*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013): 63.
- <sup>14</sup>*Culag* refers to the "Main Administration of Camps (responsible for management of the labour camps)" according to Gregory L. Freeze in *Russia: A History*. Popular use of the term is in reference to a bitterly cold, prison work camp in the farthest reaches of Siberia.
- <sup>15</sup>Leslie Woodhead, *How the Beatles Rocked the Kremlin: The Untold Story of a Noisy Revolution*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013): 64.
- <sup>16</sup>Sabrina Petra Ramet, "Rock: The Music of Revolution (and Political Conformity)" in *Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994): 5.
- <sup>17</sup>Leslie Woodhead, *How the Beatles Rocked the Kremlin: The Untold Story of a Noisy Revolution*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013): 64-5.
- <sup>18</sup>*Soviet Youth Culture*, edited by Jim Riordan. (London: The Macmillan Press, 1989): 50.
- <sup>19</sup>George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 656.
- <sup>20</sup>Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany*, (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000): 170.
- <sup>21</sup>Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany*, (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000): 199.
- <sup>22</sup>Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany*, (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000): 180-1.
- <sup>23</sup>Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany*, (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000): 199.
- <sup>24</sup>Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany*, (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000): 198.
- <sup>25</sup>Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany*, (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000): 200.

<sup>26</sup>"Estonian Song and Dance Celebration," *XXVI Laulu-Ja XIX Tantsupidu: Aja Puudutus Puudutuse Aeg!*, accessed October 7, 2014, <http://2014.laulupidu.ee/>.

<sup>27</sup>"Estonian Song and Dance Celebration," *XXVI Laulu-Ja XIX Tantsupidu: Aja Puudutus Puudutuse Aeg!*, accessed October 7, 2014, <http://2014.laulupidu.ee/>.

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