

Turbines and Weapons for Latin America:

Czechoslovak Documentary Film Propaganda in the Cold War Context, 1948-1989

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Abstract *This article focuses on the Czechoslovak documentary film production concerning Latin America in the context of the Cold War. It is analysed as a crucial means of domestic propaganda, promoting involvement in a distant region before a wider public. This was achieved by creating a matching discourse of social and political developments in Latin America and of Czechoslovakia's particular role in it. First, the results of the original research in film and television archives are presented, and the titles are situated into a larger political and cultural context within which they came into existence. Second, there follows a semiotic analysis of the prevalent motives of the films, based on Barthes, Geertz and Lotman. Last, the enclosed filmography offers a complete list of Czechoslovak documentary production in the studied period, which was possible to identify in the archives. The research then confirms the link between the salient foreign-policy actions and the documentary film production between 1948-1989. The semiotic analysis puts in evidence a highly pragmatic and manipulative nature of the Czechoslovak Communist propaganda, obvious for instance in its selective treatment of the military regimes in the Southern Cone. This text contributes to a better understanding of the complex nature of Czechoslovakia's political, economic and cultural engagements thanks to which it became an influential political actor in the Cold War Latin America.*

Keywords: Czechoslovakia, Latin America, semiotic analysis, Cold War, documentary films, propaganda, international relations.

Introduction

Bariri was was not an end, however. It was the beginning of the invasion of Czech turbines to Brazil. (1972)¹

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When the Cold War rivalry between the USSR and US began to play out in Latin America in the 1950s, Czechoslovakia held a crucial position in bridging the Soviet bloc's strategic foreign policy interests in the region. Being the only Communist country with an existing network of embassies across Latin America, coupled with a history of economic and military cooperation dating back to the first half of the 20th century, it was well positioned to actively cooperate with some of the reform-minded and left-leaning regimes of the Western hemisphere, such as Jacobo Arbenz's Guatemala, Salvador Allende's Chile, Velasco-Alvarado's Peru, Ortega's Nicaragua, and most importantly, with Fidel Castro's Cuba. In practice, this position meant the sale and transfer of know-how and technical personnel, credit conditions favourable for Latin American partners, as well as intelligence cooperation with the objective to demonstrate the advantages of socialism and ultimately introduce it in a highly strategic region where the US imperialism was, supposedly, on the losing side.

As a result of this constellation, Czechoslovakia's political, economic and cultural engagements in Latin America scaled up dramatically in the Cold War period. Notwithstanding that the foreign policy was defined, or in the best of the cases co-defined in a top-down manner by Soviet and Czechoslovak Communist authorities, a necessity soon arose to justify these new foreign policy goals to the general public. A wide range of domestic propaganda tools were deployed in this task.²

The documentary films are approached as a reflection of the Czechoslovak Communist regime's idea of its role and perceived mission in the distant states of Latin America, rather than a record of "real" events. Along with Marc Ferro, they are conceived as a historical phenomenon, one that narrates a parallel history.³ This text is, therefore, a contribution to a better understanding of the foreign policy ambitions of Communist Czechoslovakia in Latin America in the second half of the 20th century, one that should help better to understand the com-

plex political, ideological and economic reasons leading to Czechoslovakia's emergence – fully in compliance with the Soviet Union's interests – as an influential foreign policy maker in different Latin American countries.

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The roots of the active role of Czechoslovakia in Latin America in the Cold War era date back to the first decades of the 20th century. The newly created independent state then established an extensive network of embassies and consulates across the Western hemisphere designed to assist its trade interests; helping to open new markets for its vibrant arms industry. The tradition of trade exchanges and diplomatic cooperation, although briefly interrupted during WWII, put Czechoslovakia in a unique position within the Socialist bloc countries which had only limited presence in the region. This exceptionality became relevant towards the end of the 1950s: it was through Czechoslovakia that the USSR established its first indirect contacts with Fidel Castro's armed movement in 1958.⁴

It was only after January 1959, when Castro and his men came into power in Cuba, that the USSR saw a real opportunity for action in the Western hemisphere. Until then, the region was understood as the exclusive area of interests of the US and Czechoslovakia was the first Socialist country to open an embassy and intelligence headquarters in Cuba. In the early 1960s expectations ran high: Czechoslovakia was to act as an icebreaker for the Socialist camp in Latin America, or a bridge between the two regions.

This article first outlines the Czech documentary film production relating to Latin America between the years 1948 and 1989.⁵ The goal is to place the results of the original research in the Czech film archives (National Film Archive, Short Film archive and Czech TV archive) into a larger political, cultural and foreign political context within which these titles came into existence. Documentary films will then be the subject of semiotic analysis in the second part of the text. Last, the enclosed filmography offers as complete list of Czechoslovak documentary production in the studied period, which was possible to identify in the archives.

Czech Documentary Films Relating to Latin America, 1948 – 1989

From the “Sharp” to the “New” Course: 1948-1958

Following WWII, the film industry in Czechoslovakia was nationalised. The instrumental use of film in service of the state was made easier than before, yet attempts to employ film as a cultural tool was, by no means, a communist invention. After 1948, the film production mirrored ideological impositions of the “sharp course” of cultural policy (1948) requiring all production to be in the service of the first Five Year Plan (1949-1953). Institution-wise, the film industry suffered from competing interests of the Ministry of Information (Mol) and the “Kulturprop,” propaganda department allied to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, until it passed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Culture in 1956.⁶ All information was subject to control of the authorities, exercised through *Hlavní správa tiskového dohledu* (the Main Council for Press Surveillance), a specialised censoring body. Calls for liberalisation followed even after the “new course” in cultural policy was announced (1953).

It was in this context that the first documentary films about Latin America appeared in the decade after the 1948 communist coup. They were invariably the fruit of the labour of Jiří Hanzelka and Miroslav Zikmund, amateur filmmakers who recorded their journey through Africa and America in the futuristic model of Tatra T 87 vehicle with a camera. Their trip from Buenos Aires to Mexico City, carried out between 1948 and 1950, was promptly turned into a series of documentary movies directed by J. Novotný, featuring, among others, *Ostrovny milionů ptáků* from 1952 (*Islands of Million Birds*, from Peru’s Chincha Islands) about guano extraction in Chile; *Lovci lebek* (*Headhunters* about Shuar indigenous peoples from Ecuador, 1953); *Býčí zápasy* (*Bull-fights* featuring Mexico and Peru, 1955). Two films reflected Czechoslovakia’s commercial activities in the region: *Československé motocykly v Guatemale* (*Czechoslovak Motorcycles in Guatemala*, 1952) portraying the renewed trade exchange between the countries in 1950s. However, it was the shipment of Czechoslovak weapons to Guatemala which caused the fall of Jacobo Arbenz’s government in 1954.⁷ *Stavba lihovaru v Argentině* (*Construction of Distillery in Argentina*, 1952) is the celebration of Czechoslovak technological capacities, as it depicts the world’s biggest distillery construction in Argentina supervised by Czechoslovak experts. Several Hanzelka and Zikmund’s documentaries were also employed in a feature film *Z Argentiny do Mexika* (*From Argentina to Mexico*, 1953).

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Hanzelka and Zikmund's films, though conceived and begun just before the communist coup, had to comply with the ideological impositions assigned to all cultural production in the early 1950s. The quality of the production was judged according to "educational" qualities. "Relaxing" movies, on the other hand, were to be avoided as 'escapist entertainment [is] sought by those who do not go with the times.'⁸ While cinema programmes formerly featured a steady proportion of US blockbusters, this practice was dramatically curtailed after 1948 in favour of domestically produced movies or those from ideologically allied countries. As a result, the cinema attendance hit historical minimum in 1950.

Hanzelka and Zikmund soon became the "official" artists of the new regime.⁹ As recent research shows, their films attracted the audience of millions: they met the Czechoslovak publics' desire for visually attractive entertainment, one where the political and educational contents could be easily ignored. Moreover, their films offered spectators the possibility of imaginary travels to exotic places, otherwise forbidden to the majority of Czechoslovak citizens at the time.¹⁰ The popularity of the duo soon overshadowed the pre-WWII generation of Czech filmmakers with professional interest in Latin America who did not, however, meet the ideological requirements of the time: i.e. Škoda car and Aero airplanes promoter František Alexandr Elstner who filmed in Mexico, Argentina and Uruguay in 1930s, popular composer, adventurer and filmmaker Eduard Ingriš who left for exile in Peru after 1948 Communist coup in Czechoslovakia, and Vladimír Kozák, a Czech expatriate in Brazil whose almost 600 documentary films remain largely unstudied until this day.¹¹

Latin America at the Crossroads, 1959-1968

The change in Czechoslovakia's internal propagandic attention paid to Latin America changed dramatically after the victory of the *barbudos* led by Castro in Cuba in 1959. The Cuban Revolution dramatically upset a century-long hemispheric "*Pax Monrovia*na" defined by US hegemony over Latin America, and polarised old debates about social injustice in the region. Moreover, as Tulio Halperín Donghi observed, the Cuban Revolution came at an opportune moment, in the view of those outside Latin America who wished to encourage socialist transformations there, and at a perilous moment for the international

champions of capitalism. When policymakers in Moscow and Washington, D.C., spoke of a 'Latin America at the crossroads' they both described this reality and indicated their own disposition to influence developments in the region.¹²

Regarding Czechoslovakia's engagement with the region in the 1960s, expectations ran high: Czechoslovakia was to become an ice-breaker of the Socialist camp in Latin America.¹³ Through Cuba, its task was to penetrate the rest of Latin America. Building on the long-term, uninterrupted track of economic cooperation with Cuba, Czechoslovakia wasted little time before it became its 3rd most important trading partner. The MFA launched two high-level goodwill missions to other countries of Latin America with the expressed goal of establishing a favourable impression of Czechoslovakia before they too became the foci of revolution: in 1960 to Uruguay and Brazil, Peru, Colombia and Venezuela; in 1961 again to Brazil, then Mexico, Ecuador, Chile and Bolivia.¹⁴

This political mission was reflected in the new foreign policy strategy for Latin America, approved in Prague in 1960, and confirmed by internal propaganda. Apart from printed media, there was a boom in professional documentary production about Latin America in the 1960s, carried out through the state enterprise *Krátký film*, as well as shifting domestic discourse about the region. Two countries enjoyed more prominence than others in the 1960s: the newcomer Cuba and the traditional trade partner of Czechoslovakia, Brazil.

Cuba became the most important reference for the Czechoslovak documentary production in the early 1960s, especially after Castro declared, in April 1961, that it was to become a socialist country. The first documentary title from Cuba, Bruno Šefranka's *Havana* (1961) was filmed in an excited atmosphere just after the failed attempt at a US-sponsored invasion in the Bay of Pigs / Playa Girón in April 1961. Šefranka's film portrays some of the captured Cuban exiles awaiting trial, showing them as glimpse at Cuba's past in contrast with the future symbolised by housing estates construction in Havana. Busy market streets in the centre of Havana are apparently not yet affected by the deficiencies caused by the state takeover of farms and retail commerce. The film is an inspiring piece of propaganda both by what is shown and by what is left unmentioned, most importantly the prominent role that the Czechoslovak weaponry played in the celebrated defeat at Bay of Pigs. Following the tremors in diplomatic links between Cuba

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and the US in 1961, ties between Cuba and Czechoslovakia grew even tighter and the Czechoslovak Embassy in Washington became Cuba's official representation in the US.

Reflecting politically motivated cultural cooperation, other documentary films about Cuba followed.¹⁵ They portrayed the country as a model of tropical socialism, or a new tourist destination for organised travel from Czechoslovakia: *Ostrov slunce (Island of Sun)* by Papoušek, 1964; *Havana-Praha* by Růžička, 1962-63.

Brazil, a traditional trade partner of Czechoslovakia in Latin America, was undergoing a highly conflictive period in the early 1960s with a turmoil partially inspired by the Cuban example. Apart from facing a complex situation of internal political polarisation, (then) President Quadros defended the right of Brazil to lead an independent foreign policy: after re-establishing diplomatic relations with the USSR and refusing to express support for the Bay of the Pigs invasion of Cuba and he went on (1961) to award state recognition to Argentine-Cuban revolutionary icon Ernesto Che Guevara. This was to be one of his last decisions as president. His successor, João Goulart (1961-1964), further intensified a reforms project and extending suffrage, legalising peasant leagues and adopting a programme of land redistribution.

In the midst of this reform period, Czechoslovak documentary filmmakers began focusing on Brazil. Jaroslav Šikl, for instance, directed a film about Brazil's new capital. *Dvě města (Two Cities)*, 1964) compared the old, aristocratic and leisure-oriented Rio de Janeiro with the construction of the 'capital of architects,' the modern city of Brasília initiated in 1956 under the leadership of the president Juscelino Kubitschek whose Czech descent goes curiously unmentioned in the film. The closing lines leaves little doubt where the filmmaker's sympathies lie: Brasília was to become a 'City not blessed by Christ but by man' in reference to the emblematic figure of Jesus Christ above the city of Rio de Janeiro. By the same author and a result of the same trip, a film essay about the Amazon titled *Lidé od velké řeky (People on the Banks of the Big River)*, 1964) depicts the 'life of ordinary people' from the rainforest.

Brazil continued to be Czechoslovakia's most significant trading partner in the region even after the installation of the military government in March 1964; the hydropower plant in Bariri on the river Tietê in Sao Paulo state was built with the help of Czechoslovak expertise, as well as a water dam supplying electricity to Brasília. Diplomatic relations were enhanced as well and the Czechoslovak Embassy in Brasília

widened its portfolio to assume the role of official representative of Cuba after the Brazilian post-*coup d'état* government severed its diplomatic links to Havana.

Documentary films about Brazil continued to be produced in the second half of the 1960s. Now, it was with a salient non-political character avoiding any reference whatsoever to the repressive military government: Rudolf Krejčík's *Hrst kamínků z Brazílie* (*A Handful of Stones from Brazil*, 1966) offers a collection of holiday-style snapshots with highlights such as Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, and Iguaçu waterfalls; *Butantan*, 1966 depicts world-acclaimed biomedical research centre in Sao Paulo.

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Propaganda vis-à-vis New Friends ... and Foes in the 1970s

Czechoslovak documentary film production relating to Latin America in the 1970s mirrors the internal political changes that unfolded in post-1968 Czechoslovakia and the new foreign policy realities in several countries of the region, notably in Chile under the presidency of Salvador Allende (1970-1973) and Peru under the reformist military government of Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968-1975). Ironically, among the first statesmen to publicly justify the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the allied armies of the Warsaw Pact was – to the dismay of many sympathisers with Cuba in the country – was Castro. Prague's foreign policy towards its partners in Latin America fell back under the domination of Moscow and the re-establishment of the orthodox Communist party line in Czechoslovakia affected those filmmakers who, such as Zikmund, had engaged in reform efforts during the Prague Spring. His political involvement hampered further professional activities of what were the icons of Czechoslovak documentary filmmaking in the previous decades.

Whereas the official propaganda kept insisting on the political importance of the left-wing movements in Latin America, evidence shows that in the 1970s, besides ideology, the governing principle of mutual relations became the economic importance of Latin American countries as markets for Czechoslovak machinery and industrial exports.¹⁶ This pragmatic attitude affected, in turn, the logic of national propaganda making: an example of this phenomenon is the treatment of Argentina, the 3rd most important trading partner of Czechoslovakia after Cuba and Brazil. Violent actions undertaken by Argentina's

military *junta* went conspicuously unmentioned, whereas the Chilean military regime was virulently attacked by Czechoslovak propaganda.¹⁷

When Allende was elected to president in Chile, and launched a process of restructuring Chilean society along socialist lines, the country soon became the Socialist bloc's most important political partner in Latin America, second only to Cuba.¹⁸ This was a dramatic shift for a country whose diplomatic links with Czechoslovakia were severed between 1947-1965. Shortly after Allende assumed office, Šikl went to Chile to film a documentary piece *Viva Chile* (1971) – a comment-free mosaic of the country and its peoples. Land reform attempts of Allende's government were the main theme of another celebratory documentary by Hladký entitled *Majitelé* (*Owners*, 1973). Apparently, this film was completed only shortly before the military coup led by the general Augusto Pinochet; images of the deceased Allende were probably added only later. Hladký's *Předehra* (*Overture*, 1973) boasts the cooperation of Allende on the script. This intense spell of Czechoslovak documentary activity in Chile was no longer possible after September 1973, and especially after diplomatic relations between Prague and Santiago de Chile were again interrupted in protest against the military coup *d'état*. Prague's economic policy towards Chile was, however, more pragmatic than its diplomacy and trade between the countries continued beyond 1973.

In the early 1970s, a curious version of social revolution "from above" was taking place in Peru under the leadership of the reform military government of Alvarado. A process of agrarian reforms was launched, along with some redistributive measures, and the state extended its strategic areas of industry, such as petroleum and fishing. Czechoslovak companies provided technical and expert cooperation in large-scale energy projects, such as Mantaro River, later also in Pucallpa and Laguna Yarina. Internal propaganda followed suit. Needless to say, in the 1970s, Peru was distant to most Czechoslovaks except for the tragic earthquake in 1970 that killed a national climbing expedition to the Andes.

Several films were produced under the direction of Šikl ranging from the didactic portrait of the country entitled *Peru*, through an attempt at explaining the social changes in El Condor Pasa to an essay about the harsh life of indigenous peoples living around Titicaca, *Lidé blízko nebe* (*People Close to Gods*), all produced in 1975. Perhaps the most accomplished Šikl's film *Čekání na loď* (*Waiting for the Boat*, 1976), de-

picts medical action of the Peruvian government deep in the Amazon. A military boat carrying doctors, vaccines and other advances of civilization is shown as it penetrates the jungle and reaches remote villages.

Czechoslovak documentary production in the 1970s paid considerable attention to Mexico—a country with stable trade, political and cultural relations with Czechoslovakia during the 2nd half of the 20th century. It was widely known among the Czechoslovak public due to the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, held in the atmosphere of growing internal discontent.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Czechoslovak documentary films avoid any kind of politicisation, and choose to focus on the traditions and history of the country: Šikl's film *Odsouzení pro Niké* (*Convicts for Niké*, 1970) about the unsuccessful performance of the Czechoslovak team at the World Football Championship in Mexico; Špáta's *Velikonoce v Mexiku* (*Easter in Mexico*, 1971) offers a series of holiday-style impressions of Mexican traditions and favourite pastimes.

Director Jiří Svoboda followed in 1973 with the film *Ciudad de México – Den nezávislosti* (*Mexico City – the Independence Day*). Skalský's *Mexico, 1977*, *Země pod Popocatepetlem* (*Country below Popocatepetl*, 1978) and *Mexiko 1978-1980* (directed with Vrabc) offers little more than a didactic collection of historical and geographic curiosities. Controversial issues, such as the violent repression of student gatherings at *Tlatelolco* square in 1968, or the rise of a rural insurgency in protest against the government of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) are completely omitted by the Czechoslovak documentary film production.

By the 1970s the two channels of Czechoslovak public television became an established platform for the dissemination of internal propaganda. It was in this decade that Czechoslovak TV also started to commission documentary films. Testimony to this new phenomenon are two films directed by Polák: *Expedice Cotopaxi 72* (1973) which documented Czechoslovak-Polish volcano research and *Za Kofány, barevnými indiány v pralesích Río Napo* (*Visit to Cofan, Colourful Indigenous Peoples of Río Napo*, 1973) depicted ethnographic work of the same expedition in the eastern stretch of the rain forest of Ecuador.

A complete list of the documentary films production in the 1970s also includes titles concerning Cuba that kept enjoying an extraordinary level of attention by the Czechoslovak internal propaganda, one that can only be explained by its importance as the only Socialist country in the Western Hemisphere.

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The Last Cold War Decade: Nicaragua

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The last decade of the Cold War commenced with ground-breaking political changes in Nicaragua. In 1979, a violent internal conflict and decades-long rule of the Somoza family were put to an end. The victorious Sandinista government initiated massive land reforms, as well as promoted national literacy and health campaigns. The USSR, Cuba and Eastern European countries perceived this development as the long-awaited success of the Cuban example in the region; they offered financial support to Ortega's government. Czechoslovakia's economic and technological assistance took on the character of providing international aid though there was also close cooperation in the field of intelligence activities. At the same time, Nicaragua was capable of mobilising a wider international movement of solidarity beyond the East-West division that sent volunteers to help with coffee and cotton harvests.

Czechoslovakia's internal propaganda assisted in creating the image of Nicaragua as a country undergoing the process of liberation from long decades of a US-supported, corrupt and bloody dictatorship, a country in an urgent need of "fraternal" aid and cooperation. Director Bojanovský was responsible for three films about Nicaragua in 1986: *Rama-Kay* is an ethnographic document about the inhabitants of the island Rama-Kay; *Vulkán (Volcano)* depicts sweeping political and social changes in the country through the lens of communist propaganda. Finally, *Nicaragua* (ČFT 30/86) was a short piece filmed as part of the weekly Czechoslovak Newsreel (*Československý filmový týdeník*) and designed to inform the public about political developments in Nicaragua.

Closing in on the end of the Cold War, the country enjoyed diplomatic relations with all countries of Latin America except Chile, Belize and some island states of the Caribbean.²⁰ In 1988, the last strategic documentary film of cooperation between Czechoslovakia and Latin America was edited by the communist government in which Cuba and Nicaragua enjoyed an exceptional position for ideological reasons. Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay were labelled as traditional and stable partners of Czechoslovakia, as well as Mexico. Though neither Venezuela, nor Ecuador ranked among top allies, especially the former was an important market for the Czech industry. Films focusing on these

countries, such as Jakeš': *Mezi Caracasm a Canaimou (Between Caracas and Canaima, 1986)* and *Ostrov Margarita (Margarita Island, 1986)*, and Dvořák's *Ekvádorské děti (Children of Ecuador, 1982)*, *Quito, Město na sopce, (Quito, the City on the Volcano, 1983)* and *Želví ostrovy (Turtle Islands, 1983)* paid attention to natural beauties of Venezuela and Ecuador, respectively.

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Film Propaganda as a Mirror of the Communist Regime's Imagination

With al-Qaeda displaced from its previous headquarters in Afghanistan several prevalent motives and themes can be detected in Czechoslovak documentary film production concerning Latin America between 1948-1989. Since the film industry was strictly controlled by the state, these recurrent motives can be analysed as those that the communist authorities judged most suitable for 1. creating a desirable image of the situation in a particular Latin American country, and setting the suitable discourse, and 2. gaining support for existing Czechoslovak actions there.²¹ This was especially important in such cases that the ideological partnership weighed more than eventual Czechoslovak economic losses, as was the case of Cuba and later Nicaragua. Documentary films are, therefore, approached here as a reflection of the Czechoslovak and Soviet communist regimes' imagination of their perceived role and mission in Latin America. Rather than perceiving them as a registry of "real" events, they are read as a cultural text '(s)ince images, sounds, objects and practices are sign systems, which signify the same mechanism as a language, we may refer to them as cultural texts.'²²

The prevalent motives of the films are detected and analysed with the help of semiotic analysis as proposed by Barthes, Geertz and Lotman.²³ Film propaganda is not only capable of registering the reality but also, and more importantly, of manipulating it. Along with Ferro, we read it therefore as a historical phenomenon, yet one that narrates a parallel history. The prevalent motives can be characterised in the following way:

First, the **negative role of the United States in Latin America** where the US and its economic, ideological and foreign-policy interests in the region are portrayed with fierce criticism in Czechoslovakia's documentary production between 1948-1989. From Cold War propaganda logic, the US is consistently linked with references to violence, mo-

nopoly, and lack of legality. In the early 1950s, Hanzelka and Zikmund expressed their indignation at not being able to ride roads privately owned by the United Fruit Company depicted as an unconstitutional external hegemon in Central America: 'In the Banana republics of Central America, one word of the director of this company weighs more than Constitutional law.'²⁴ Any kind of anti-US action was, therefore, appreciated and that government of Alvarado was attempting to break Peru's dependency on the US was welcomed by Czechoslovak propaganda which depicted the Peruvian military government in positive terms (*El Condor Pasa*).

The failed attempt of the US-sponsored Bay of the Pigs invasion of Cuba (1961) also offered rich materials for Czechoslovakia's internal propaganda and images of sharks accompany comments about the US: 'Cuba has enemies with explosives made in USA [*sic*].'²⁵ Some of the US-trained Cuban exiles 'wanted to shoot their way back to the nationalised cement mill previously owned by their father.'²⁶ According to *Havana* (1961), the US blockade of Cuba was there to cause food shortages on the island of freedom, but this was not going to happen, as 'new [Cuban] agriculture overcome the monoculture production, and now produces everything.'²⁷ At the same time, it is noteworthy that references to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis was completely omitted by film makers; a remarkable contrast when compared to its prominence in the print media.²⁸

Second, **the Spanish conquest of Latin America and especially its cultural heritage of Catholicism** were portrayed in negative, retrograde and manipulative terms, reflecting the Communist regime's anti-religious stance. Spaniards are featured as representatives of a cruel colonial system: 'terrible killings brought about by those who resembled white Indian god'²⁹ that enriched themselves at the expense of the conquered: 'Peruvian gold paid the construction of Madrid, see fleet and London'³⁰ while young Indian boys were exploited in the colonial mines (*El Condor Pasa*). Francisco Pizarro is labelled as 'illiterate savage,' a representative of 'Europeans, Spanish conquerors, who strangled with their own hands this culture and nations.'³¹ The Church was 'introduced by their Royal Highnesses'³² to control effectively the population. 20th century Communist propaganda echoes the Spanish Black Legend elaborated by Elizabethan propaganda centuries before.

Religion is, however, presented as gradually losing its exclusive position among the population, although in Nicaragua 'there is *still* a no-

ticeable uproar from the Church's altar.³³ The same is suggested in the case of Brazil: its new capital city is depicted as a 'city which is not blessed by Jesus Christ but a man' in reference to the emblematic statue of Christ above the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's former capital. In future-oriented, modern Brasília, even the cathedral is built by architects of Marxists inspiration.³⁴

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Third, the **indigenous past and present** received a considerable amount of attention by Czechoslovak filmmakers. Starting with Hanzelka and Zikmund's portrayal of Shuar peoples from the early 1950s and ethnographic picture of Ecuador's Cofan Indians 20 years later, Latin America's indigenous peoples are depicted with sympathy, yet as exotic relics of the past. They are however, being reached and saved by the advances of civilization, represented, among others, by the military boat penetrating the Peruvian jungle and bringing medical personnel and vaccines (*Čekání na loď*, 1976, *Lidé of velké řeky*, 1964). A dead and silent Mexican history 'drown in the blood running as a result of arms held by Spanish conquerors' does have a future: optimistic and multi-racial Mexican youth – 'heirs of the winners and losers' – is shown climbing the pyramids: 'little Indians alongside white boys and mestizo'.³⁵ Rama peoples of Nicaragua can – thanks to Sandinista victory 'live as they wish for the first time since inhuman Somoza regime'.³⁶ In *Peru 87*, highland indigenous people are confronted with images of construction of the power plant on the Mantaro River. The film is creating the image of progress impossible to stop.

Critical attacks on indigenous religious beliefs can be found in otherwise sympathetic accounts of the Shuar peoples. Hanzelka and Zikmund explain the violent headhunting tradition as a result of evil-manipulation of their spiritual leaders, much alike the attacks against Catholicism: '(t)hey are manipulated by their shamans. They are the real originators of the killings as unlimited lords of Shuar until today'.³⁷

Fourth, the **depiction that contemporary Latin America as a region of sharp social inequalities that can be remedied by more just governments** was focused on in Czechoslovakia. The lack of universal healthcare observed (in the late 1940s) by Hanzelka and Zikmund in the leper colony of Paraguay set an early tone for the Czechoslovak official perspective of the region: 'they cannot buy their own life, so they are waiting for death. We must not forget that cultured nations [...] have an obligation to turn back to life [...] people from Santa Isabel'.³⁸ Most documentary films depict poverty in Latin American neigh-

bourhoods, or in the countryside, in contrast to luxurious constructions: favelas of Rio de Janeiro and working class outskirts of Sao Paulo which lack running water and electricity while the high-rise buildings pride themselves in the swimming pool on the rooftop (*Z Argentiny do Mexika, Peru 87, Předehra, Ecuador, země na rovníku*).

There are exceptions to this landscape of poverty and injustice, and models to follow, however: Cuba is shown as building socialist-style housing estates (*Havana*) and in the modern city of Brasília 'swimming pools are a matter of fact' (*Dvě města*), Allende's Chile and Velasco-Alvarado's Peru are building modern flats for workers (*Viva Chile, El Condor Pasa*). Efforts at land reform promised to establish fair conditions in the countryside (*Předehra*), while illiteracy is combated after the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua which meant a 'step towards a better society' under the motto '(r)evolution taught children to read and write.'³⁹ Whereas a positive treatment of Cuba and Allende's Chile comes less as a surprise, the fact that the military regime in Peru receive positive treatments in Czechoslovakia's propaganda is intriguing; as if a distinction is drawn between "good" and "bad" military regimes in Latin America: '(s)oldiers who swore the revolution' are equated to modernisers of the country, 'messengers of new era' who, for the first time in history, penetrate the Amazon on board a military boat carrying doctors and vaccines. These revolutionary soldiers are positive heroes: they 'desire to be the mythical condor that stands on guard of the Peruvian revolution.'⁴⁰ They are contrasts to the negative protagonists of history, the "old" Spanish and Creole soldiers who had controlled Latin America for centuries. Finally, Latin America's 'better societies of the future' are unanimously portrayed by the Czechoslovak film propaganda as racial democracies. Some of the films even explicitly deny existence of any racially-inspired inequalities (*Z Argentiny do Mexika, Dvě města*). As Šíkl claims about Brazil, "There are no concerns about races here. You meet Indians, blacks and whites."⁴¹

The fifth theme gravitates around **Czechoslovakia's cooperation with Latin American countries**. Documentary film production depicts diverse types of economic assistance and cooperation with the region, ranging from geologic research (*Czechoslovak Geologists in Cuba, Expedice Cotopaxi 72, Expedice Ecuador*), massive energy projects (*Peruánské postřehy, Kilowatty z Tieté*), industrial complexes (*Lihovar v Argentině*) to the exportation of machinery (*Československé motocykly v Guatemale, Peru 87*). Czechoslovakia's technological advancements

are presented in almost millenarian terms, as agents of modernity and civilization. The image of this country as an industrial power is consistently reinforced by Czechoslovak internal propaganda over the four decades studied here. First, the “engineers” Hanzelka and Zikmund drive through Latin America in their Tatra car; later, there are the Czech anonymous engineers building energy plants in Latin America and overcoming natural hurdles with the help of the most advanced technologies: ‘Bariri was not an end, however. It was the beginning of the invasion of Czech turbines to Brazil.’⁴²

One aspect of Czechoslovakia’s cooperation with the region was avoided in film propaganda, namely Czechoslovakia’s arms sales to Latin America. Beyond technological cooperation, some of the films also documented the official diplomatic and cultural contacts among Czechoslovakia and countries of the region, such as the International Youth Festival in Havana (*Mládí světa v Havaně*), an important visit of the Czechoslovak Communist authorities to several countries of Latin America (*Pod Jihoamerickým nebem*), and the musical ensemble of the Czechoslovak Armed Forces tour to Cuba (*Havana-Praha*).

Sixth, **imaginary travel to exotic places** is thematically represented. The evidence stemming from the archival research reveals that a high number of Czechoslovak Cold War documentary films about Latin America focus on natural and cultural beauties of Latin America and its people, notwithstanding the official anti-entertainment cultural policy especially strong in the first decades of the Communist rule in Czechoslovakia. Some films offer tour of important sites and holidays (*Velikonoce v Mexiku, Z Argentiny do Mexika, Hrst kamínků z Brazílie, Po stopách starých Mayů, Quito, Město na sopce, Býčí zápasy, Cesta za ztraceným městem*). Latin America’s flora and fauna are admired (*Ostrovny milionů ptáků, Želví ostrovy*) and most importantly, the unique habitat of the Amazon (i.e. *Lidé od velké řeky, Z Argentiny do Mexika, Lovci lebek, Za Kofány, barevnými indiány v pralesích Río Napo*). Though these documentary titles were conceived as “educational” and always contained some aspects of Communist-era ideology, they fulfilled the need for visually attractive entertainment for a Czechoslovak audience banned from international travel on their own.

Finally, it is important to note the **themes that speak by their absence**. One aspect of Czechoslovakia’s cooperation with the region avoided by propaganda was, as noted, Czechoslovak arms sales to Latin America. Second, there are no references to the Cuban missile crisis

in 1962. Third, the selective nature of the Czechoslovak communist propaganda is evident from the fact that it chose to be completely silent about the violent military regime in Argentina, an important trading partner of Czechoslovakia at the time: no documentary film about Argentina was produced in the 1970s or 1980s. To a lesser extent, a similar strategy of amnesia was employed with regards to the most important trade ally of Czechoslovakia, Brazil, headed by a repressive military government after 1964. This deliberate silence contrasts to the highly critical treatment of Pinochet's regime in Chile.⁴³ Among other "silenced" issues belong Czechoslovak expatriates exiled in Latin America. These sizeable communities are ignored in the films with the sole exception being Hanzelka and Zikmund's portrayal from the early 1950s (*Z Argentiny do Mexika*).

Conclusion

Traditional historiography describes the Cold War events in Latin America as the direct outcome of superpower rivalry between the US and the USSR. Yet new archival evidence suggests a necessity to take a second look at the actions of minor players, such as Czechoslovakia. These may result in a nuanced, more complex story of Latin America's Cold War chapters.

Documentary films produced between 1948-1989 mirror the shifting imagination of Czechoslovakia's political and economic role in Latin America during the Cold War. As tools of internal propaganda, they were designed to justify new foreign-policy goals of the Communist regime before a wider public. This was achieved by creating a matching discourse of social and political developments in Latin America, and of Czechoslovakia's particular role in them. The analysis shows that the studied documentary films selectively employed a set of recurrent motives that were manipulating the reality by either highlighting some of the facts, or by ignoring them. In Ferro's terms, they were creating a parallel history about Czechoslovakia's mission in Latin America during the Cold War.

Between 1948-1958, Czechoslovak documentary titles portrayed Latin America as an exotic place suffering under the economic and ideological domination of the US. Though Hanzelka and Zikmund's films were conceived as a sort of road trip movies, their engaged commentary betrayed the Cold War logic and paid tribute to overall radicalisation of the political discourse in Czechoslovakia after 1948.⁴⁴ After

Castro's 1959 assumption of power, the boom of professional documentary production focusing on Latin America went hand in hand with the crucial importance of Cuba for the Soviet bloc, and with the new mission of Czechoslovakia as "icebreaker" for the Socialist camp in Latin America. This research proves the link between the salient foreign-policy actions and the documentary film production. Beyond Cuba, documentary propaganda focused on other crucial allies in the region, too: primarily Brazil, Mexico, Chile and Peru in the early 1970s, in the last decade of communist rule also Nicaragua. The semiotic analysis of these films put in evidence a highly pragmatic nature of the Czechoslovak communist propaganda, reflected through its selective treatment of the military regimes in the Southern Cone.

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It may now be concluded that Czechoslovak documentary films concerning Latin America played a twofold role in Communist Czechoslovakia between 1948-1989: they indoctrinated the audience according to the official cultural policy line, yet they were also offering a visually attractive entertainment to the public deprived of the possibility to travel almost anywhere, not to mention Latin America. What the loud celebration of Czech turbines' invasion to Latin America oftentimes concealed, however, was the less publicised nature of the ideological and military cooperation with Latin America.

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Notes

- 1 František Arlet (1972), *Kilowatty z Tieté*: 'Bariri však nebyla koncem, nýbrž začátkem invaze československých turbin do Brazílie,' Translation by author.
- 2 These were mainly in print media, the so-called "expert literature" as well as documentary films. For analysis of internal propaganda concerning Cuba in the print media and expert literature see: Hana Bortlová (2011), *Československo a Kuba v letech 1959-1962*, Praha: Univerzita Karlova v Praze, pp. 154-165. Only scant attention was paid to Czechoslovak documentary film production concerning

- Latin America see: Stanislav Kázecký (2004), 'Películas documentales checas con temática latinoamericana rodadas antes del año 1989,' *Ibero-Americana Pragensia*, XXXVIII, pp. 175-179.
- 3 Marc Ferro (1988), *Cinema and History, Contemporary Approaches to Film and History*, Wayne State University Press.
- 4 Bortlová (2011), p. 34.
- 4 Vlastimil KYBAL (1935), *Po československých stopách v Latinské Americe*, in 'Sbírka přednášek České akademie věd a umění', No. 5, Praha, p. 7.
- 5 Due to a limited number of documentary titles made in Slovakia, this text focuses on Czech productions.
- 6 Knapík (2006), *V zajetí moci. Kulturní politika, její systém a aktéři*. Praha: Libri, pp. 87-89 and p. 279.
- 7 Josef Opatrný (2013), 'Czechoslovak-Latin American Relations 1945-1989: Their Broader Context,' *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, 7:3.
- 8 Pavel Skopal (2012), 'Muži v sedle, v cirku a na létajících strojích. Dějiny filmové recepce v českých zemích, 1945-1953,' in Feigelson and Kopal (2012), *Film a dějiny 3. Politická kamera, Film a stalinismus*, Prague: Casablanca-Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, p. 327.
- 9 This image was enhanced by the fact that some of their projects were completed at the confiscated Dobříš Castle, the official Writers Union retreated from the proximity of Prague. Here, Hanzelka and Zikmund also enjoy the creative company of some of the left-leaning foreigners who found political exile in Czechoslovakia, such as Brazilian writer Jorge Amado and his wife Zélia Gattai.
- 10 Skopal (2012), pp. 340-343.
- 11 Kázecký (2004), pp. 175-179.
- 12 Tulio Halperín Donghi (1993), *The Contemporary History of Latin America*, Duke UP, p. 293.
- 13 Bortlová (2011), p. 53.
- 14 *Ibid*, p. 53.
- 15 Czechoslovakia's credit and know-how was, among others, instrumental in the construction of Cuban film laboratories, as well as the Cuban Film institute (ICAIC). See Bortlová (2011), p. 91.
- 16 Opatrný (2013).
- 17 *Ibid*.
- 18 Michal Zourek, 'Political and Economic Relations between Czechoslovakia and the Military Regimes of the Southern Cone in the 1970s and 1980s,' *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, 7:3.
- 19 A social and cultural awareness about Mexico was enhanced by some Mexican feature films screened in Czechoslovak cinemas in the 1950s and 1960s, such as *Pueblerina* (1949, directed by Fernández).
- 20 Opatrný (2013).
- 21 For a comparison see the analysis of the internal propaganda relat-

- ing to Cuba between 1959-62 in Bortlová (2011), pp. 154-165.
- 22 Chris Baker (2000), *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, London: Sage Publication, p. 11.
 - 23 Ronald Barthes (1967), *The Elements of Semiology*, London: Cape. Ronald Barthes (1972), *Mythologies*, London: Cape, Clifford Geertz (1997), *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books and Yuri Lotman (2001), *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, Indiana UP.
 - 24 Jaroslav Novotný (1953), *Z Argentiny do Mexika*: 'V Banánových republikách Střední Ameriky platí jedno slovo ředitele této společnosti [United Fruit] více, než ústavní zákon.' Translation by author.
 - 25 Bruno Šefranka (1961), *Havana*: 'Kuba má nepřátele s traskavinami made in USA.' Translation by author.
 - 26 Ibid, 'Jejich plán bylo znovu se prostřílet ke znárodněným cementárnám svého otce.' Translation by author.
 - 27 Ibid, 'Nové zemědělství teď prolomilo monokulturu a pěstují vše možné.' Translation by author.
 - 28 Bortlová (2011), p. 165. See also, Michal Špaňár (1996), *Karibská krize a její čs. Reflexe*, MA Thesis. FSV UK. Unpublished, pp. 57-81.
 - 29 Jaroslav Šikl (1975), *El Condor Pasa*: 'strašlivé vyvražďování přinesli lidé podobní bílému indiánskému bohu.' Translation by author.
 - 30 Ibid, 'Za peruánské zlato se stavil Madrid, flotily, Londýn.' Translation by author.
 - 31 Novotný (1953), 'Evropané to byli, španělští conquistadoři, kteří vlastněma rukama zardousili tuto kulturu i národy, jež ji tvořili.' Translation by author.
 - 32 Ibid, 'Církev, kterou přivedla její katolická veličenstva.' Translation by author.
 - 33 Vítězslav Bojanovský (1986) *Vulkán*: 'Stále ještě významný halas od kostelního oltáře.' Translation and emphasis by author.
 - 34 Jaroslav Šikl (1964), *Dvě města*: 'Tomuto městu nežehná už Kristus, ale člověk.' Translation by author.
 - 35 Novotný (1953a), 'Malí indiáni vedle bílých chlapců a míšenců.' Translation by author.
 - 36 Bojanovský (1986) *Rama-Kay*: 'Poprvé od nelidského Somozova režimu žijí jak chtějí.' Translation by author.
 - 37 Novotný (1953), notes that 'Jsou zmanipulovaní lékaři-kouzelníky. Ti jsou původci vraždění, neboť jsou dodnes neomezenými pány Šoarů.' Translation by author.
 - 38 Ibid, 'Nemohou si koupit vlastní život, proto je Santa Isabel osadou mrtvých [...] Nemůžeme zapomenout, že kulturní národy majípovinnost vrátit k životu statisíce nešťastných, jako jsou lidé ze Santa Isabel.' Translation by author.
 - 39 Bojanovský (1986), 'Jeden krok k lepší společnosti [...] Revoluce naučila děti číst a psát.' Translation by author.
 - 40 Šikl (1975), 'Vojáci, kteří přísahali na revoluci [...] 'Poslové nové doby [...] Armáda touží být bájným kondorem bránícím peruánskou

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- revoluci.' Translation is ours.
- 41 Šikl (1965), 'Starosti s rasami tu nemají, potkáte mezi nimi i indiány, černé, bílé.' Translation by author.
- 42 Arlet (1972) *Kilowatty z Tieté*: 'Bariri však nebyla koncem, nýbrž začátkem invaze československých turbin do Brazílie.' Translation by author.
- 43 General A. Pinochet is depicted by communist propaganda as the embodiment of the Latin American military dictatorships' cruelty. Opatrný (2013) and Zourek (2013).
- 44 It would be a mistake to see propaganda as a novelty introduced only after the communist takeover. Comparative research suggests a considerable measure of continuity before and after 1948. See Lucie Česálková (2012), 'Noví noví lidé. Budovatelská tematika v produkci Krátkého filmu v letech 1954-1954,' in Kristian Feigelson and Petr Kopál (eds) (2012), *Film a dějiny 3. Politická kamera, Film a stalinismus*, Prague: Casablanca-Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, p. 460.